On Knowing Humanity Journal

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Creating a Christian faith-based approach to anthropology, incorporating insights from theology into ethnography and analysis, and allowing religiously committed anthropologists to speak freely of the ways in which their commitments inform their theory and practice. Raising new questions and lines of research on subjects such as: the significance of humanity's unique calling in nature for personhood and the construction of culture; the underlying reasons for humanity's destructive behavior toward self, others, and the environment; and the role that divine redemption and hope play in human lived experience and practice. Reincorporating teleology, in the sense of purpose, into scientific understanding, inviting dialogue between Christian anthropologists and anthropologists of all persuasions around a deeper understanding of the human condition, and encouraging the doing of anthropological research and writing through the eyes of faith.

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When Sally Became Harry and the Church Went OMG: Gen Z, Gender Identity, and the Christian Church

Vincent E. Gil

In this investigation I review unobtrusive data sources that reveal those significant differences embodied in Generation Z ("Gen Z," born after 1996), to help understand how their particular social, emotional, and ideological make-up align (or not) with the Christian faith. In doing so, my query and discussion focuses on several Gen Z distinctives which are discordant with traditional views of the person—gender and sex; self-identification vs assignations by social entities; religious ideologies; and other differences. How are these ideological positions, behaviors, gender and physical transformations in Gen Z being received by the Christian Protestant church? How is the church responding? Christian parenting is also brought to the forefront in the discussion, as are their efforts at moving faith to the next generation. Such is contrasted with youth engagements by the church and its youth programs. Finally, I question whether our Christian anthropology is capable of opening wide enough to accommodate differences of intersex births and gender dysphoria, given its present orthodox theology and understandings of persons and bodies. This investigative discussion ultimately ends by suggesting the church ought incorporate Miroslav Volf's "embrace" of the 'other' as it relates to Gen Z—our deepest challenge here: to love Gen Z without judgment, discipling and welcoming them into our congregations—*they/them,* and all.

When you are born has a larger effect
on your personality and attitudes
than the family who raised you.
—Jean Twenge, *Generations*

Introduction

One doesn't have to roll the time needle back too far to encounter the beginnings of the *"gender moment,"* a movement already running its first leg with the start of the present century. [1] By 2000 the landscape of gender and sex itself had begun to change dramatically, due in particular to earlier writings by such queer theorists as Judith Butler, who, in the 1990's, began to question *gender binarism* and treat it as "an oppressive duo" (Butler 2006). [2] Later came figures whose 'transitions' became public, the likes of Laverne Cox (2006), Jazz Jennings (2007), Chaz Bono (2009), and the famously outed *trans*formation of Bruce to Caitlyn Jenner (2015). In 2017, National Geographic

[1] "The gender moment" summarizes a dynamic social period wherein traditional notions of gender are being questioned, redefined, and expanded. It comprises social, cultural, legal, and technological changes that collectively result in positions about gender which differ broadly from historical ones. Some believe this cultural change period can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender.

[2] See also Butler (1993). *Queer Theory* challenges normative understandings of sexuality and gender, and suggests these identifiers are not fixed, inherent, but rather socially constructed and thus fluid. It questions and then attempts to deconstruct, "destabilize," societal norms and discourses that "privilege certain identities over others" to "free the self from social contrivances and lexical impositions." (Paraphrased from Butler's cited works.)

documented the rising requests of teens to transition in its landmark feature volume on the Gender Revolution.[3]

Labels and acronyms were also changing fast—by 2010, it was no longer MTF (male to female) or FTM (female to male) transitions and neologisms that had entered lexical imaginaries and become real possibilities: gender itself had become a *spectrum.*[4] Those in the zone of transformation now had their pick of landing platforms: one could simply be *questioning,* or not decide which place to land as *nonbinary* ('*enby' [NB]* for short)*;* or even be all that you were meant to be, or *pangender.* You could decide you had *no* gender, and state yourself as *agender.*

Orange may have become the new Black in the process; but now, Sally *could* become Harry, or *Salandharr, Harrandsal, Nosalnoharr*; take a new name, adopt new monikers that befit their emergent identity and discard any "assigned"; assignations of the type Butler (2024) has insisted are not only oppressive, but ring of fascist impositions.

Speaking of *assignations*, novel gender ideology questioned the idea that a genetic test at birth ought to determine one's sex. Biology became marginalized by the very process of lexically minimalizing its influence and its importance in self-understanding (Butler 1993).[5] By extension, if one was "sex assigned" this would then presumably influence one's gender. Butler insured that by arguing we *perform our sex assignment*, we also *perform gender*; that "gender performativity" would then cement the desired correlation between birth sex and gender performance.

Thus, both were seen as imposed on the person by other entities—which underscored the lack of control a person had over who they *really* were, their being—material and emotional. New acronyms followed: There's AMAB (*assigned male at birth),* and AFAB *(assigned female at birth)*, the very idioms an effort to insure one knew that *sex is assigned*—and assigned via social contrivances and institutions; all, other than biology itself or the person itself. Use of the terms *sex* and *gender* as synonyms became normed, and trended to be both seen as assignations not founded on one's body, but on one's acquired performances (Gil 2022, 49-50).[6]

Generation Z (1997-2012)

Into this new world came Generation Z, born after 1996 and encountering the millennium as they started preschool. Much has been already written about Gen Z, now one of the most studied generations, for multiple reasons. These were the first truly *digital natives*, never experiencing anything other than a digitized world from birth. They've grown up with smart phones and tablets as Nannies; learned to scroll and thumb through media, games, blinking lights, before they could actually utter a comprehensible full sentence. They've thus spent more time on internet, media, gaming, than talking to real people of any age—never mind their parents—or more 'remotely,' their grandparents (Barna Group 2022a). This is also the generation that suffered COVID in isolation during their most vulnerable and significant years of

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[3] National Geographic, *The Gender Revolution, Special Edition.* January, 2017. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pdf/gender-revolution-guide.pdf.

[4] By 2018 the American Medical Association had all but adopted policies aimed at insuring their affirmation of the "medical spectrum of gender." Its policy resolution, H-65.962, passed and modified November 18, 2018, is explained by AMA Board Member William E. Kobler, MD in a press release that day, as follows: *"Sex and gender are more complex than previously assumed. It is* [therefore] *essential to acknowledge that an individual's gender identity may not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. A narrow limit on the definition of sex would have public health consequences for the transgender population and individuals born with differences in sexual differentiation, also known as intersex traits."* https://www.healio.com/news/primary-care/20181115/ama-affirms-medical-spectrum-of-gender. Here again is the conflation of biological sex with the socio-psychological construction of gender; the prioritizing of gender variance by protecting it from [unstated, undetermined] "public health consequences"—at the same time expanding the definition of sex beyond *male, female, intersex*, and into an unspecified breadth, i.e., not "a narrow limit." What, then, does "sex" now define if not its own *unspecified spectrum*—its endpoint yet to be known . . . limitless also? Debra Soh (2022) has already contested these assumptions and provided biological facts to show their errors.

[5] Contested in Gil (2023).

[6] See also Butler (1993).

teenhood—and thus also suffered many losses to their education, their social skills development, as well as their self-confidence.

Barna Group has noted in multiple surveys, year after year, that this generation embodies the most significant array of mental health issues compared to prior generations (Barna Group 2022b). That said, Gen Z also offers up convincing evidence of come-backs, resilience, even involvements with social justice issues despite their own concerns.[7] Gen Z'ers are not easily categorizable, although similarities of experiences and outcomes certainly run through their gauntlet.

Gen Z and Gender

Gen Z also inherited the running train of the gender moment, growing up and into teenhood with saturations of gender fluidity via countless media exposures, school friends who've 'outed,' engaging spectral possibilities and gender nonconformities for self-identification that go way beyond historical or customary views of gender, and which by extension also reinterpret the meaning of sex (Gill 2022). This remarkable ascendancy of gender theory *as fact* has prompted a sea change in how Gen Z conceptualizes, articulates, and ultimately renders their self-understanding (Twenge 2023b).

And it is evident in their lexicon: Gen Z speaks the current language of gender effortlessly, something that still confuses many Gen X (1965–1980) and Millennial (1981–1996) parents. Aside from the more common terms now in use, like *cisgender* (*'cis'* for short), or *transgender* (now meaning anyone *not cis*), there's an interesting array of terms like *demiboy, demigirl,* to self-refer. Included in this lexicon are all the pronouns, now staples of self-identification: *he/him, she/her, shim, neutrois, they/them*. This generation feels it's important to state your pronoun(s), much as you state your name. (In many cases novel onomastics do not link names with gender, so yes, one *can't customarily tell* from a name who he/she/they/them are.) Gen Z is also reported to be the first generation in which a majority believe there are more than two genders (Twenge 2023b, 2).[8]

There's a certain comfort one feels Gen Z has with gender exploration—if not about themselves, certainly comfortable with friends who are exploring, 'daring' to be who they feel they are and not who they were 'assigned' to be. There may even be a certain hoopla when telling of friends who've come out as trans.[9]

This right to explore gender 'options' coincides with shifts in values and norms that emphasize an individual's fundamental right to self-rule. The core feature here is not just individual rights, but the right to *self-identify* and thus to *self-represent* without regard to customary biological, social, or legal parameters. Elsewhere, I've explored the trend and called it *a social movement of self-representation* (Gil 2021, 2). No-one, no entity, ought to define *you.* You should not be presumptively placed into established categories of being and be required to stay in those frames—your consent never asked for, anyways. Binary normativity based on sexual dimorphism is irrelevant, thus chromosomal inheritance is of no value to identity. The body—well, that's been called a "mute facticity"—a fact that doesn't speak at all to one's *being* or one's *becoming* (Butler 2006, 129).[10] As a matter of course, the only validity that remains is what one *believes* and *feels* about one's self. Such sentiment often appears now as a rather institutionalized rebellion against the binary, even in some cases *any* gender label (Davis 2017).

And the changes are striking. Jean Twenge, who with colleagues has copiously analyzed recent longitudinal data on this and other generational cohorts, reports:

> The number of young adults reporting they identified as transgender quadrupled between 2014 and 2021, while the number of transgender persons in older age groups stayed about the same.

[7] Gil, V.E. "Gen Z'ers Are Changing Relationships More than Ya Think. Ya." http://drvincegil.com/downloads.

[8] See also Twenge (2023a).

[9] Bernstein, Samuel Rae. "Transgender Is Not a Scary Word." TedX Talk, Laguna Blanca School. Viewed at: https://amara.org/videos/10LIt03oJ63j/en/2159483/

[10] Rebuttal to Butler's ideas about the body being mute on communicating sex and gender to the brain comes from Gil (2023) and Soh (2021).

> Transgender identification was virtually identical across age groups in 2014; but by 2021, four times more young adults identified as transgender. (Twenge 2023b, 4)

She thus notes the "skyrocketed" numbers of 18-26 year-olds that identified as *trans*, growing the population of transgender young adults in the U.S. from around 220,000 in 2014 to around 900,000 in 2021—an increase of about 680,000 new *trans*persons. While the 2021 ratio of transgender among Boomers stood stable at 1:1,000 (one-tenth of 1%), the ratio among Gen Z young adults was 23:1,000 (2.3%); or put another way, 20 times more. Moreover, the 2021-2022 aggregated data Twenge reviews conclusively show that 1 out of every 18 young adults in the U.S. now identify as *some category* other than male or female (ibid., 6).[11]

Gen Z Females vs. Males and Gender Trouble

Digging deeper, one finds there is indeed a significant imbalance in the sex ratio of who is wanting gender identity and/or sex change today. Among Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials, those who've wanted a change in gender or sexuality were about *equally* born *as* males or *as* females—this per birth records.[12] Among Gen Z, over *two thirds* of those seeking other statuses during the same period examined by Twenge and others were *born females at birth*,[13] underscoring the immense generational differences in the sex ratios of those wanting a gender/or/sex alternative.

These trends are confirmed by CDC's data from the *Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System (BRFSS),* which also highlight changes aren't *just* a generational differential; it's also fact that *it is the younger female population of Gen Z,* those born from early 2000's forward and now in their teens-to-20's, that show a cumulative jump of 48% identifying as *trans*, and an even higher 60% identifying as nonbinary (trans figure included in this percentage in some years' data.)[14]

Not only has the trans trend accelerated, but the increase in predominantly teen-to-young adult *females* who now identify as *enby* or *trans*—who want new nomenclature and/or body alterations—statistically and otherwise lend credence to socio-cultural and psychological variables as motivators. (For a sidebar on this position, see footnote below.[15])

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[11] Also, U.S Census Bureau, *Household Pulse Survey 2021, 2022.* At https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html.

[12] U.S. Census Bureau Data: *Live Births in the U.S. Data Tables for 1965-1994*. At https://www.census.gov/topics/health/births-deaths.html.

[13] Aside from Twenge (2023b), see Shrier (2021) and Grossman (2023).

[14] Center for Disease Control. *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2000-2024 Data*, at https://www-.cdc.gov/brfss/index.html. The terminology gets confusing since *trans* is now a generic label for anyone that does not identify as *cisgender* (male or female). The use of the term *nonbinary* is also often used coincidently as a synonym for *trans*, given that the nonbinary individual isn't conforming (either) to a 'cisgender normativity'. You can be *trans* and *nonbinary;* and survey responses often reflect this trend. Thus, in some years' datasets the *trans* label predominates, while in other years the *nonbinary* label predominates. Regardless, the percentage jumps are so significant as to not be due to chance!

[15] *Sidebar:* Notions that there are socio-cultural and psychological variables fueling the now statistically significant upswing in transgender adolescents and young adults (AYA), especially females, emphasize a social contagion hypothesis. Here, already sensitive AYAs, many experiencing mental health issues if not socially conforming pressures, are heavily influenced by social media trans groups and friends who are "considering" they may be *enby, trans, questioning*. In this view, AYAs begin to attribute their psychological problems to gender dysphoria. There are factual reports of 'online friends' influencing decisions; that the only way to overcome feelings of depression, anxiety, body issues/dysmorphia, is to transition (See Ludden, 2023; also, Dishion and Tipsord (2011); as well, *TransgenderReality* website, at https://transgenderreality.com. There's also the popular trans-affirming site *4thwavenow*, at https://4thwavenow.com/).

In other writings I have likened this phenomenon to a *culture-bound syndrome* (Gil 2021, 27, 51, 200-201). Culture-bound syndromes are composed of certain behaviors, affects, somatic feelings that are out of the ordinary in a culture, which occur among certain groups, and thus are reasons for distress and discomfort. ROGD exhibits all the qualities of a culture-bound syndrome affecting a particular subgroup. See Morandini (2023); Diaz and Bailey (2023). (This last paper was *retracted* in

Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria

In 2018, Lisa Littman began to document this trend, which she theorized and called *rapid onset gender dysphoria* (Littman 2018). ROGD is not a diagnosis but a type of dysphoria which occurs in adolescents, and those who experience it are overwhelmingly female. These teens showed no signs of gender dysphoria before puberty but reported a sudden shift in gender: a conflicted gender identity as teens, thus the condition being labeled *rapid-onset* gender dysphoria.

In such cases, and confirmed via research, the impact of social media on this shift cannot be understated. A scoping review by Hilty et al. (2023), reveals the deleterious effect social media have on adolescent mental health and by extension, gender identity development. These teens encounter repeatedly diverse identities online and encouragements to explore their own gender 'truth'. Peer dynamics only exacerbate the questioning, teens seeing peers or influencers openly discuss and sometimes video their transitions online (Hilty 2023).[16]

Do These Transitions Stick? Desistance and Gen Z

Proponents of gender self-affirmation have historically cast doubt on both studies of desistance and data regarding the reality that desisters not only exist, but that most adolescents with initial gender conflicts will overwhelmingly change their minds by later teenhood.[17] There are two terms that need to be understood here: *desistance,* and *detransition.* In desistance, the teen 'grows out of' or in other ways stops believing that they have gender dysphoria, often becoming increasingly convinced (either by their morphing body or by other equivalencies) that they are congruent in their sex and gender. They therefore *desist* in pursuing notions of gender change or body modification(s), in effect renouncing a prior transgender identification. In *detransition*, the teen who was involved in gender/sex change does an about-face and pursues *reversing* the change. Detransition occurs mostly when the teen has already begun the process of change, via a new name, being administered puberty blockers, and/or is receiving actual alternate hormone administration. Detransitioning in its most technical sense means attempting a *reversal* of the process of physical gender/sex reidentification.[18]

Those who have renounced a prior transgender identification are now increasingly visible (Littman 2024).[19] In the cited Littman study of individuals 18-33 years who previously identified as trans and had stopped, even after a mean trans identification of 5.4 years, the study reports 53% felt they had experienced a form of ROGD. Most astounding, fewer than 17% had *actually met the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for GD in childhood/adolescence when diagnosed as GD.*[20] And again, most were natal females—who after desisting, began identifying themselves as exclusively homosexual in orientation.[21]

November, 2023 due to growing article censorship on writings that affirm reports by parents as accurate. Diaz and Bailey's data validated their reflecting on ROGD as a "socially contagious syndrome," a position which proponents of gender transition decry.)

[16] See also Morandini (2023).

[17] Zucker (2012); Mayer and McHugh (2016). Also see Callahan (2018); and most importantly, Steensma (2013).

[18] At some point, detransitioning is not possible—particularly when the administered sex hormones have truncated the ability of sex glands to produce natal hormone(s), usually beyond the sixth month of administration. Within eight months to a year of alternate hormone use, the body reaches the tipping point: there is definitive chemical castration, and individuals become irreversibly infertile at this point. However, the process varies and is dose-dependent: each body reacts differently. Physiological body changes are often not reversible, save some which may be amenable to surgical reconstruction such as when breast tissue has been excised.

[19] See also corroborating studies: Jedzejewski (2023); Irwig (2022).

[20] The diagnostic criteria can be found in the *DSM-5TR* at 302.85 (F64. 9), *"Gender Dysphoria in Children and Adolescents."* American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,* Revision 5TR (2017ff).

[21] It should be clear to the reader that *sexual orientation* refers to whom the individual is erotosexually attracted; while *gender identification* is the individual's inner sense of a gendered self. *Sexual identity* is understood to be one's bio-hormonal/physical-

Taken together, these data results and trends ultimately suggest that among Gen Z, the variegation now visible in gender self-identification, coupled with the significant urgings from media and peers, contributes to the commonality of gender identity self-exploration and questioning I have described, and not witnessed in earlier generations. Such volume increase does not appear as the result of a more precise medical detection of gender dysphoria, or less social discrimination, 'more awareness', or even federal guarantees of equality; given that the rises occur in particular age and sex cohorts in Gen Z, not in Gen Z as a whole; and not in any proximate, contemporary generation.

If one also takes into consideration the significance of mental health issues experienced by Gen Z overall, one begins to see coterminous parallels with social contagion and culture-bound syndromes, these potentially accounting for the growth in teen females who want transitions. Moreover, studies reviewed also suggest that medical protocols for diagnosing adolescent and young adult GD are often *not followed*—fewer cases actually meeting compliance standards for adolescent gender dysphoria designations, yet nevertheless being given this diagnosis.[22] Finally, studies also reveal that living in role and name change do not always or significantly affect prior mental health issues of these youth. Many of their depressions and body issues remain unchanged, as do suicidal ideations in those who had them prior to any transition (Morandini 2023, abstract).

Gen Z, Sum of its Parts

To sum up the status of Gen Z, one can propose this generation embodies the full complexity of the age, its characterologic uniqueness, much of which is fueled by those extraordinary experiences of this generation in its time, social, emotional, and physical spaces. Gen Z is quite distinct when compared to other generations that precede it; certainly, in living the duality of a real and even bigger online life while attempting to sort out the factual from the imaginary.[23] We see difficulties with social-emotional development; at times codependency on the internet and social media for information, social support; gaming for social networking and for adrenaline needs. Many wear bruises from conditions they've had to tolerate—the isolation, loss of friendships, education, family disruptions; and the list can go on.

At other times Gen Z evidences breaking the boundaries of such gauntlets, forging forward with their requisites for equality, authenticity, self-understanding, self-identification and becoming—'no matter what'. It is

genital make-up, which identifies the person as either *male, female,* or *intersex*. It is not uncommon to find desisting individuals coming to terms with earlier confusion between sexual orientation and gender identification: see Callahan (2018). See also, de Vries (2014) and Marchiano (2020).

[22] NHS England, which recently conducted an independent review of its gender identity services (2023-24), concluded there is "scarce and inconclusive evidence to support clinical decision-making" for minors with gender dysphoria, and that for most who present before puberty it will be a "transient phase," requiring clinicians to focus on psychological support and to be "mindful" of the risks of even social transition. (*National Health Services—England*. "The Cass Review: Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People." Report Summary, April 2024.)

Experts are also questioning the evidence underpinning adolescent GID guidelines. Professor Mark Helfand at Oregon Health and Science University identified several deficiencies in WPATH's (World Professional Association of Transgender Health) recommendations, such as lack of a grading system to indicate the quality of the evidence; while Professor Gordon Guyatt at McMaster University found "serious problems" with the Endocrine Society guidelines, including pairing strong recommendations with weak evidence. Helfand explains that calling a recommendation 'evidence-based' should mean a treatment has not just been systematically studied, but that there was also a finding of high-quality evidence supporting its use. (See Block 2023.)

[23] Current research continues to show that young people tend to land on social media as their "third space," these being *digital natives* from the start. Here, in the third space of the internet we find this generation's collective identity; an extended worldview that comes with growing up on the internet and interacting with multiply different perspectives and peoples to satisfy their ongoing loneliness. Myriad opportunities present themselves online for parasocial relationships; for them to explore their identities and understand how *others identify*; how identities "shift" and change, and storylines they willingly believe to be authentic. See the current study from UCLA (2023) "Teens & Screens," authored by Stephanie Rivas-Lara, et al., and funded by the Center for Scholars and Storytellers. http://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/css-teens-and-screens-2023-report.

this generation in particular which during 2020-2021 demonstrated *en masse* in the agora against racial and other prejudices that were choking the U.S.

Gen Z: Religion, Religiosity, and the Church

With significant generational distinctions in view, it is now possible to explore Gen Z's configuration and query its 'goodness of fit' with that of the normed Christian (and in particular) Protestant orthodox church.

Gen Z is Less Religious

Studies again confirm that Gen Z is less religious and less involved with religious affiliation than prior generations. In a recent Center of American Life survey (2022), over a third identified as believing "nothing in particular," or "agnostic," "atheist." Data also confirm that only about a quarter of Gen Z attend or visit a religious service regularly (thus overall, "religiously unaffiliated"); and slightly less than half retain any certainty in the belief a God exists. It stands to reason that prayer to a deity is also much less common among this generation (Cox 2022).

One can well identify influences which have shaped this dwindling religiosity and religious values in Gen Z: increasing secularization and a broad societal acceptance of secular vs. religious viewpoints have obviously played influential roles in the declining religious adherence among the younger population, even among their parents.[24] These influences, coupled with a social push for greater individuation and the general sentiment that what one believes is of greater significance than what organized religion teaches, render a noticeable trend among Gen Z to accept their own conclusions vs. that of established religious doctrine.[25] Moreover, being born in the digital age with vast access to information—whether verifiable, accurate, or inaccurate seems to make little difference in an age of unvetted 'truths'—allows this generation instant exploration of diverse perspectives, and encourages a mindset of *"thus, I know best"* (Twenge 2018, 166).[26]

For many, there's also distrust of religion, because Gen Z has come to believe religion promotes outdated ideas and behaviors which Gen Z feel ought be acceptable (e.g., cohabiting vs marrying; being gay; gender individuation). More young people now associate religion in general, and Christianity in particular, with rigidity and intolerance (Twenge 2018, 167). If Gen Z is to invest time and energy in the pursuit of the spiritual, these will most often form personal belief systems that align with 'spirituality' and alternative forms of meaning-making, such as meditation, 'mindfulness', and non-traditional spiritual practices.[27]

Gen Z and Formative Religious Experiences

There are significant differences between the formative religious experiences of Gen Z and their preceding generations. Developmental involvement in formal religious activities is far less common for young people today than it was even among their Millennial parents. Gen Z who have Christian parents report being much less involved in attending worship services as children and as teens. Less than half of Gen Z (40%) say they attended church (in any format) weekly. This, with less participation in the 'formative' aspects of growing a Christian faith, such as via Sunday School, discipleship classes, or some type of religious education program (excluding those that attended a religious elementary/or other school.)[28] At home, generational differences evidence a decline in this generation being consistently exposed to a modeled Christianity; being read stories of a religious nature or with religious characters, and in reading of Scripture at

[24] Pew Research Center (2019b). See also Pew Research Center (2019a).

[25] Springtide Research Institute (2021). See also Twenge (2018). The notion of Gen Z being "spiritual" but not "religious" is refuted by Twenge, who feels Gen Z is "less spiritual than their elders" (p. 158) and argues with facts that "spirituality has not replaced religion among the young" (p. 158).

[26] One of the most significant shifts here is the declining reputation of Christianity, especially among young Americans. See Barna Group (2007). See also Kinneman (2012).

[27] Barna Group, in association with Impact 360 Institute. *Gen Z, Vols. 1, 2.* (2021, 2022). At https://barna.com/resources.

[28] Pew Research Group (2019b).

home.[29] I will return to home life and parental involvements below, for further comments.

'The Church' and Gen Z: Goodness of Fit or Misfit?

The Christian church is aware of the challenges and opportunities that Gen Z represents, particularly in discipling a generation that has problems adhering to traditional doctrines and understandings without significant questioning.[30] Neither are they bound to believe in *"sola scriptura"* as the overarching doctrinal compass for their Christian faith.[31] And it's not that the questioning is out of order—every generation sifts through their faith and challenges it: in particular, Gen Z is very sensitized to perceived hypocrisy within the Christian church, especially when such pertain to political affiliations by the church, or how it engages social issues (Murrie 2021).

Gen Z responds best to a Christian faith which is consistent in its applications; is not selective or aligns only with certain political ideologies. Gen Z has discovered the value of *authenticity* and promotes it ('authenticity' being in large part what fuels their self-identification and need for "living out their truth.")[32] Yet living out Christian ideals and principles authentically and communally is problematic for many Gen Z'ers based on conflictual elements these have witnessed in churches—the church having persistent problems by surrendering to exclusive socio-political alignments; problems embracing social justice equilaterally; decrying racism, and its membership living up to the moral integrity being taught (Ammons 2024). These become roadblocks to Gen Z in that disjunctions of faith and practice force the question, *How can I be integritous and authentic in this religious climate?* (Murrie 2021, 4).

It may be evident after the paragraphs above that Gen Z does not 'fit' as neatly into Christian Protestant denominations and conservative church culture as did prior generations.

Gender and its Troubles

A significant area of challenge needing discussion here brings us back to two of the main issues in this investigative piece: highlighting sex and gender as viewed by contemporary culture and Gen Z, and what has consistently been the Christian church's views.

I've argued elsewhere the church needs a more open and nuanced perspective to deal with this "gender moment" (Gil 2021). This means the church working to retain its foundational doctrinal beliefs about sex and gender while correcting dogma and suppositions that can no longer retain validity in contemporary life (ibid.). Here, my focus is specifically on how Gen Z'ers who may believe in a gender *spectrum*, and also even see physical sex as possibly *nonbinary*, relate to the Church's normative position on both gender and sex. Some may be already questioning or labeling themselves trans *despite being in a Christian faith*.

Vice-versa, how does the Christian church move itself to some level of reconciliation with Gen Z, who may themselves be experiencing gender trouble, or have friends who have transitioned and are accepted by them. Is our Christian anthropology of self and body reconcilable in ways amenable to both the church and Gen Z?

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[29] Springtide Research Institute (2021).

[30] Pew Research Group (2019b).

[31] *Sola scriptura* is the belief that canonical texts of the Bible are alone the authoritative source for Christian doctrine. Gen Z's values, which often highlight individualism and personal autonomy, can and do affect their interpretation of *sola scriptura.* Gen Z is generally inclined toward a more 'personal spirituality'—meaning a subjective interpretation of their faith, sometimes at the expense of traditional doctrines. (See Barna Group, *Gen Z,* Vols 1, 2.) That said, the broad trend in contemporary Protestantism is to balance interpretations with historical and sociocultural contexts, respecting the integrity of the textual message but integrating interpretive contributions and communal discernments, which many denominations of Protestantism now feel is critical for maintaining a living, robust and informed theology. Generally speaking, Protestant denominations strongly disciple adhering to interpretations of doctrinal truths as *revealed truths*, held as inspired and God-ordained, and thus not 'personally negotiable'. A majority of Protestant faiths subscribe to the *sola scriptura* position, albeit some having their own historical interpretations of the canon alongside it as a guide to faith and practice.

[32] Gil, V.E. *"Gen Z'ers Are Changing Relationships," op.cit.,* 1. http://drvincegil.com/downloads/.

This section, however, is not intended to discuss all the nuances or the issues involved in contemporary positions of gender or attempt a critique of how the church is handling these. Those, I've already undertaken (Gil 2021). The goal here is to discuss how the church is 'performing' in fostering Christian Gen Z inclusion, particularly for those with gender fluidity or questioning gender.

Body and Identity Concerns

From my own and other's research on Christians with gender dysphoria and gender nonconformity cited earlier, there is evidence some Protestant churches have shifted how these view body and identity. Some are aligning more with the societal (and thus generational) positions on gender fluidity and non-binarism. Any differences adopted are now most evident in *non-denominational (unaffiliated) congregations* of the Protestant faith, and not nearly as much in mainline affiliated denominations. There is virtually no change in views in evangelical/orthodox churches (Smith 2017). Thus, what is seen now as 'permissible', 'factual', 'acceptable', depends on which denomination or branch of Protestant Christianity one is referencing. There is no longer one, dogmatic viewpoint on gender; or stretching it—even binary sex (Lipka and Tevington 2022).[33]

Feeling Vulnerable, Ashamed

My experiences with gender questioning or trans young adults who are Christian lead me to believe these feel most vulnerable when their church sees their issues as psychological and/or spiritual *confusion*, and reject in part or all other possible diagnoses (Gil 2021).[34] These Gen Z feel blamed for their feelings even when blame hasn't been outright verbalized: they are made to feel ashamed, a shame that urges a change of mind and heart, since their feelings put them "at odds with God's will," and even "God's image." This, they do hear.[35]

These churches retain a view of sex as binary; and as corollary, gender identity as also binary and solely stemming from bodily sex. Some congregations make distinctions between *gender nonconformity* and *gender dysphoria*, well and good; but remain adherent to the inappropriateness or sinfulness of any body modification to appease dysphoria (Gil 2021, 137-173). In this view, gender dysphoria is 'psychologically malleable', changeable; thus subject to being corrected through a deeper understanding of the sanctity of the body and God-ownership of it.[36] Elsewhere, I have discussed the difficulty of making space in these church environments for intersex born (DSD) individuals as well as those with accurately diagnosed, often historical gender dysphoria—Christians who may have transitioned and feel their transition in fact opened a new life in God for them (Gil 2021).[37] The open question which remains is what these more orthodox churches wish for those that question gender, or have in fact transitioned: Discipling them into repentance? Detransitioning? Can such persons be incorporated into the life of the church *as they are, and not as the church presumes they ought to become now*— assuming these desire that inclusion?

Feeling as Not Belonging

It is not uncommon today to find young persons who have 'grown up' in church, have a history with a Christian faith, now *questioning* or outright beginning some level of gender transition, *'rebranding'* of their identity. As stated, these have significantly different experiences negotiating any change while living out their faith in a congregational setting—a lot depending, again, on their church climate. Here are four quotes:

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[33] This Pew research is illustrative of the wide difference now existing among Protestant denominations, who show a distinctive fractioning into views other than gender being determined by sex at birth, and the view that gender can be more than binary. Some have also embraced the inclusion of intersex persons, making the binary a threesome: male, intersex, female.

[34] See chapters 3 and 7.

[35] See Moon (2019). Her original publication appears in Tobin and Moon (2019).

[36] As example, see Walker's arguments in Walker (2017).

[37] See chapter 3.

> Part of me is welcomed in the church and part is not. I get it, but it's hard for me to leave a part of myself outside the church door.
>
> I wondered whether I was stepping off a cliff, transitioning not into living as my true self, but rather dying as a despised and humiliated fool who had compulsively thrown away a perfectly good life . . . Could I find a home in the church? I asked [Reverend XX] 'Are transgender people welcomed here too?' He replied, 'Yes', then I pressed: 'And what about present members?' 'No, we've never met one [a transgender] before.'
>
> I walk with a 'limp' (not literally, but) . . . aware of the ways my religion and culture keep me and others broken and afraid. My roots in Augustinian anthropology mean that any self-respect gets tied up in selfishness and shame. Luther wrestled with this constantly. But not to present myself honestly to the world is to deny the work of my Creator. I am not simply male, I am transmasculine, and that is important and holy to me. My faith gives me the freedom to refuse assimilation. (Anonymous 2017)[38]
>
> Nobody [in the church] seems to understand the dimensional social spaces within which 'we' who've transitioned have to navigate. That my church didn't provide a more sustaining environment—even if just for the sake of loving a troubled individual through their crisis—is both a testament of loss and a statement of how much work the church needs to still do.[39]

Theology aside here, the feeling of *not belonging* or *belonging only partially* is as real here as it is with minorities of different sorts; the kind of emotional angst which doesn't let a young adult fully root because they feel at the margins.

When we look at how often church folk interact outside their circle of comfort with *others not alike them*, we find startling statistics: In a 2017 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute (see References below), most conservative Protestants have not had close contact with *any trans person* (only 9% of them have). Similarly, mainline protestants fare little better (15%). Later polls by Pew Research (2022) up these percentages only slightly, but not significantly, even after five years (Parker et al. 2022). Unfamiliarity can breed misinformation, fear, and contempt.

Addressing theological discrepancies with differing views, interpretations, is of course much more difficult; particularly when clergy members are themselves a different generation than Gen Z and hold orthodox theological positions on sex and gender. Gen Z, as stated, can brings to the table weighty and discrepant views on gender and body sex, often shaped by norms and values of the culture at large—yet nevertheless requiring the attention of the church.

One certainty here: Gen Z is not easily persuaded that their points of view can be incorrect. Americans have been steeped in an "argument culture" (Tannen 2020), but Gen Z doesn't generally like to argue—they've heard enough of that between parents. Gen Z prefers dialogue of the sort that one can have with others (as these do online), that tries to find common ground through accommodation and prioritizes *authenticity* and emotional intelligence. Getting Gen Z to see another viewpoint thus requires clarifications, demonstration of facts that are themselves '*authentic'* and relatable; ultimately, trustworthy as based on some measure of accuracy (Murrie 2021). Religious doctrines, however, seldom accommodate change via dialogical processes and often require acceptance 'by faith' and not reason or even 'scientific accuracy'.[40]

So, how *is* the Protestant Christian church reaching Christian Gen Z'ers and those with gender conflicts?

Ecclesial Culture, Discipling Gen Z, and Home Life (Again)

Significant literature has been recently produced by Christian writers, ministers, counselors on how to best approach, engage, disciple Gen Z.[41] Thematically,

[38] Quotes from various sections of the article.

[39] Quotation from 'Kyler', a FTM trans, as quoted in Gil (2021, 55).

[40] For a good discussion on this and related points, see Collins (2006), especially "Part Three: Faith in Science, Faith in God," pp. 145–213.

[41] See Grenell (2023); McKnight (2021); Fritz (2018); Carlson (2022); White (2017); and Kinneman, Matlock and Hawkins (2019).

recommendations for clergy converge around four foci:

- This generation requires a more relational ministry, where young people feel seen, respected, valued, and understood. This means inclusion and affirmations.

- Use of apologetics and education targeted to young persons, shared by a younger generation of ministers who have a solid footing in the faith. Here, methods aim to equip young people with a foundational rationale and grounding for their faith; helping these to navigate their surrounding culture and its pressures; and helping to address tough theological questions such as those of gender ideology and sex. Making theological education personally meaningful through shared stories and engagements become the more satisfying means by which Gen Z learns.

- Digital engagement is a requisite. Gen Z is deeply immersed in social media, indeed, digital culture in general, and thus, it is necessary to incorporate and engage them through social media and online platforms specifically dedicated to the young adult. The successful church has created content that resonates with this generation, that embodies their experiences, and which provides them perspectives that are biblically sound *yet speaks their language*.

- Addressing consistency. This is where the necessity to foster attention, recognize the high level of youth today 'on the spectrum', and thus with difficulties not only concentrating, but following through on attendance; tasks done to completion before engaging other tasks; are paramount. From activities to tasks to programmed instruction, all must take into consideration the fault lines of this generation. Additionally, the *authenticity* that Gen Z wishes and tries to live up to requires that the church itself be consistent in how it applies its doctrines and dogmas, treats persons, moves toward inclusiveness, and addresses the larger social issues. Holism comes to mind here.

Reaching and discipling Gen Z thus require well-thought through and inventive programs, personal and yet communal, combining robust theological education with authentic relational engagement. The church must also address inconsistencies in how it practices its truths. It must be confessionally open to its fault-lines and sincere in its truths. As well, it needs to leverage discipleship for this generation through the use of digital platforms to reach them *consistently*, given that these may, or may not show up to physical services with any regularity.

All well and good . . . but discrepancies remain: Gen Z Christian youth aren't being convinced so often that religion, church attendance, and "walking in a faith tradition" is generally as necessary as prescribed (Twenge 2018, 157). Where are the inconsistencies?

Who's Inconsistent: Church Ministries or Parents?

Studies by the Barna Group provide significant insights into this arena—how well are Christian churches engaging Gen Z? And is home life reinforcing their faith or contributing to its faults? If the goal is to impart a vibrant, lasting faith to this next generation, Barna data are *not promising*: Christianity has less of a hold on Gen Z than on any previous age group.[42]

In these surveys, parental responsibility for passing on the faith is expressed to be of high import (82%), *but parents themselves don't discuss at home difficult topics of the faith* (80%), or issues with contemporary culture. Only 20% of parents feel comfortable having conversations about difficult topics like sexuality (20%), moral relativism (15%); too many also say they are ill-prepared to address "tough" questions about Christianity, God, the Bible, and social issues (86%) (Barna Group 2018a, 4).

These and other data from Barna studies raise the specter that Millennial and Gen X parents aren't providing the necessary groundwork, or modeling Christianity *at home* for their Gen Z kids to engage, reflect, and follow the faith of the family; nor negotiate the moral/ethical dilemmas contemporary culture poses for Christian orthodoxy.

[42] Barna Group (2018a); Barna Group (2018b); and Barna Group (2022a, Vol. 1).

Implications from these and other data reviewed and cited suggest Gen Z Christians may be living out a duality still unresolved: On the one hand, their contemporary culture has engaged acceptance of differences—ethnic, racial, gender, sexual—and they mostly have as well, to the degree that a majority of Gen Z Christians "don't mind" and often "enjoy" having friends that are *gay, trans, bi, nonbi, questioning*. These are seen as individuated expressions, and none should be denied either acceptance or friendship (or be judged) because of how/who they "are."

On the flip side, Gen Z Christian teens encounter a religious culture and set of doctrines that most often declines these gender and sex expressions as normative; counts them as "wrong" or "confused," in need of psychological if not spiritual reorientation and repentance. While their church may be 'welcoming', they are not 'accepting', or so many teen/young adults feel.

Neither do Gen Z families engage regular discussions of ethical or moral issues that their teen's generation find acceptable. Gen Z'ers don't discuss these contradictions with family, *nor do families regularly posit worthy queries that may lead to conversations*, and which may help their teens navigate them.

Is it any wonder, then, parents are surprised when their own son or daughter "outs" with a statement of self-identification that resembles that of their peers? Such, disavowing the compass provided by a faith which may enable answers and empathy while these sort through gender and sex questions . . .

Youth Ministers, Programs, and Parents

A majority of parents and teens agree that youth programs for teens—some weekly, some monthly—do provide a place for communal peer worship, asking of serious questions, and for ferreting out Christianity. However, "*the most common struggle that youth pastors report is* [again] *parents not prioritizing Gen Z's spiritual growth"* (Barna Group 2018a, 7).[43] Lack of *parental faith engagement*, particularly among those that also do not attend church regularly, creates a disjunction between what the church is trying to accomplish in teen discipleship and what may be consistencies in the teen's home.

Youth ministers also underscore that they spend *"too much time dealing with practical life topics* [which should be discussed at home] *and not enough time talking about foundational beliefs"* (Barna Group 2018a, 7).[44] In addition, 'mixing' trying to reach the unchurched youth who do attend, and grow those 'who have a faith' is a struggle for many youth pastors (ibid., 7-8).

Barna Group data—which at present are the most thorough, deep-dives on Gen Z and Christianity—demonstrate clear faith fault-lines between parental and Gen Z generations (Barna Group 2022a).

In particular, the admitted unpreparedness of parents to deal with both life issues and tough theological questions with their teens and in the home *is alarming*: Lack of parental follow-through in engaging a lived faith as demonstration for their children is clearly in view.

Youth pastors, while nearly all feeling they are prepared to their best capacity to address worldview topics and biblical theology with the youth these serve, nonetheless feel the acute disjunction between what parents live out, reinforce at home, and what church programs can facilitate. Regardless of the many recommendations in the cited literature on programs tailored to Gen Z, the *one* element which all *leave out,* but which Barna data capture so well, is this rupture between the good wishes of parents, their own faith's visibility, and how these in fact handle their children's faith heritage *at home*.

Revising a Christian Anthropology to Include 'The Other' and an 'Embrace'

The Church as a Safe Space.

For those with gender conflicts, the church needs to become a "safe space"—meaning providing opportunities where people struggling with a secret gender identity, those questioning or already identifying as trans, can risk "outing." Similarly, "safe spaces" where families struggling with children and adolescent issues can risk discussing their situation. Taking the step to open ourselves up to that *other*,

[43] Italicized for emphasis here.

[44] Bracketed phrase, mine.

enfolding him or her, *they or them*, with the same embrace that God enfolded us with generates the capacitation to explore their issues; and this, not in isolation.

The church should foster the kind of social agency capable of creating just, truthful, and peaceful spaces; where dialogue can help bring to individuals that necessary embrace, truths that can reconcile them to themselves and to God. This shapes a cultural climate in the church where people can thrive and not feel they live at the margins or be continually judged. To do this well, I've recommended pastors and clergy teach their congregations *civility* (Gil 2021, 182).

A Christian Anthropology of Self

To speak here as if an old surfer, *"the gnarly truth"* is that our Christian anthropology of self and body seldom makes room for all of us born outside the Garden. Daniel Patterson, in his dense tome *Reforming a Theology of Gender* (2022),[45] argues we have disordered our theological anthropology by always returning to Eden and the images of Adam and Eve "as paradigms for human beings rather than as progenitors."[46] And it is in *procreation*, not creation, that we find the troubled bodies of all others. Outside of Eden, our procreated bodies and their genetic composition, propensity for variability over time, *do toss aside* binary bodies and sometimes produce *intersex* offspring.

The eunuchs of old also bring dimensionality to the argument of different bodies, different selves, the result of different conditions and actions. Jesus does not reject the eunuchs, nor Phillip one on their way to Emmaus. Isaiah (56:3–6) prophesied of the eunuch's special place in the yet-to-come for those who follow Yahweh. Moreover, in ancient Talmudic/Rabbinical Judaism we find persons identified and religiously accepted who are *neither male nor female (tûmtûm);* or which are *both male and female ('andrȏgynȏs);* some recognized as *feminine men (sārís),* while still others acknowledged as *masculine women ('aylȏnît)* (Gil 2021, 156-160). These were not ostracized from Judaic communities; they were accepted, given roles, and not labeled as perversities (ibid., 160-161).

We have therefore work to do on several fronts. One is segregating what's coming from a social move to self-represent and self-identify which conflicts with biology, and which embraces individualization above all else. Another, to recognize what is genuinely nothing more than a *stretching of gender stereotypy*, breaking it free from conventions of the sort that trap men and women into roles not wanted or self-presentations not desired. Yet another, to acknowledge that in God's kingdom there is room for embracing differences—of the type *already embodied*: those born intersex, not as anomalies but as bearers of *imago Dei*. And by extension, room for those that have historically suffered the *disjunction of body and brain* we now understand to be gender dysphoria.[47] All these require our Christian anthropology to investigate them and respond severally with theological acumen and doctrinal clarity. What needs reformulation now requires action. What needs restatement now requires we voice it authentically and with godly wisdom.

We should embrace those Gen Z'ers who are questioning gender, their natal sex, and help them sort with grace and understanding. If we don't make room for conversations, aren't we disavowing Pauline admonitions of 1 John 3:18–19? A Christian anthropology of self and body which does not make room for the 'embrace' that Miroslav Volf (1996) suggests be part of our welcome of the other, is not worthy of its namesake. No-one should have to leave a part of who they feel they are outside a church door. Can we encourage Gen Z to "Come as you are" (Matthew 11:27–30) and get our hug?

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[45] I reviewed Patterson's work in *OKHJ*, 7(2), July 2022.

[46] First stated in this manner by Megan DeFranza (2015, 153).

[47] How an individual ultimately deals with their dysphoria is not for us to judge; nor is it our duty to try and change their minds under the guise of 'discipleship'. The renewal of any mind is tasked to the person and the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:12; Eph 4:23).

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Thin Spaces: Examining Liminality and Impending Death Through the Lens of Hospice Care

Kimberly Jo Forry

Through the lens of a particular hospice in southeastern Pennsylvania, I aim to observe how death is approached within a culture that swings between ignoring and glorifying death. Through on-site ethnographic engagement with patients of the hospice unit, informal and formal interviews with hospice staff, and scholarly analysis, I researched to discover answers to the following questions: What worlds do those who are knowingly dying inhabit? What choices do they make? What do they do and talk about? The answers to these questions offer an approach to dying that encompasses the liminal period before death, as well as the moment of death itself, as a holistic ritual. By learning from those who face death before us, I believe that we can begin to view death as a natural, sacred life transition.

Introduction

"Are you up for a visit?" I asked, while tapping lightly on the door. I was taken aback by Celeste's [1] appearance. She looked . . . different. But in what way? Similar to most times I visited, she was sitting in her recliner in the corner of the room, under the painting of the young girl and the dog. Perhaps the difference was the large glasses she was wearing. I did not recall seeing her wear them in the past. Her hair was also a bit more disheveled than usual, though she was already dressed for the day in one of her home-sewn dresses. The most remarkable thing, I determined, was the disorder around her, and her apparent corresponding mental state of disorder. She was holding two ends of a travel toothbrush, trying—I think—to fit them together. Her hand motions were uncoordinated, making the finer nature of her chore difficult. The toothbrush task was also apparently the reason for the glasses, because once she had fitted the ends together, she took the glasses off and set them haphazardly on the table beside her. Yet her unsettled state persisted, as she seemed to be searching for something. Unsure of the role I was supposed to play, I suggested a few places she could look for the (unknown-to-me) missing object. Was it in the drawer of her end table? Perhaps it fell below her chair?

Finally, for reasons only she understood, Celeste gave up on her search, put the toothbrush in a drawer, and turned her focus toward telling me about her morning. She had been given a shower—a regular occurrence on the day of the week that I visit, and a usual cause for an eye-roll or two from Celeste. "The water goes everywhere . . . I'm afraid the nurse is going to slip . . . You wouldn't believe the amount of towels they need to use to clean up afterwards!" The litany of the shower event is one I've heard from Celeste before. Some things don't change, for this story seems familiar, even if the messy breakfast tray in front of Celeste and the disorder of her bedside table and general demeanor seem foreign.

Just a few weeks prior, Celeste had used the occasion of my visit to tell me how she has always loved to clean, and still has a cleaning routine in this new living space. Each day, she explained, she wipes her rolling tray with baby wipes. She also uses these wipes to dust her end table and even uses them to wipe down her shoes. Today, in contrast, her breakfast tray litters

[1] A pseudonym.

the rolling table, remnants of cereal floating in a bowl of milk, crushed paper napkins strewn about, and a glass of half-finished juice. The baby wipes pack is nearby, half opened, but Celeste pays no attention to it. Her recently removed glasses sit atop a glasses case on her bedside table. Beside that I observe a bowl of cookies, covered with plastic wrap. Dusting could only happen here today if the clutter disappeared.

Fortunately, a cheerful aide comes to remove the breakfast tray. Celeste asks her for water and a stack of napkins. The aide returns quickly with the desired items and then leaves to continue her duties in other rooms. Celeste fusses with the disposable lid on the plastic cup of water, finally managing to remove it. The purpose of the requested napkins remains unclear. Celeste crumples one in her lap beside a tissue she plucked—but didn't use—to wipe her nose. "The oxygen makes it run," she complains. "See, I haven't even put it back in yet, and my nose started running." Finally, she slowly maneuvers the oxygen prongs back in her nostrils, looping the plastic cord behind her ears to hold the cannula in place.

"Does the oxygen help you to feel less light-headed?" I ask, knowing that this was one of the reasons she started using it more.

"I guess." She rolls her eyes again.

I change the subject, trying to steer the conversation towards something familiar. I decide to ask Celeste about today's dress, a slightly textured maroon fabric with similarly-hued buttons running down the front. Early on in our conversations, Celeste told me that she sewed her own dresses, every one patterned in the same style: a short-sleeved shirt dress, knee-length, with a collar and buttons running the length of the front. They are simple, practical, and apparently long-lasting. Today's dress, Celeste informs me, is forty years old. I quickly do the calculations in my head: I was six years old when she sewed this dress! "It's the first one I made," she says, fingering the fabric. "I always loved textures."

"Did you sew clothes for your children?" I asked, thinking of my own mother sewing matching clothes for me, my sister and herself when I was growing up.

"A little," Celeste answers, without elaborating. Instead, she shows me how the fabric of her dress is thin from age and washings, holding the fabric away from her withered legs so I can see the light shining through.

Most Tuesday mornings during the past year, in my capacity as a hospice volunteer, I've visited individuals like Celeste receiving care at an inpatient hospice unit. Patients who decide to receive this care are considered terminally ill, with a six-month or less life-expectancy. Rather than continue to pursue therapies, medical tests, or hospitalizations, these patients and their loved ones decide instead to focus on care and comfort in the time they have remaining in this life. While many hospice patients prefer to stay in their homes to die, some patients spend their final days in an inpatient unit out of necessity (lack of available caregivers at home or extensive care needs) or personal choice.

The particular unit I volunteered in encompassed a mix of very short-term (days) and longer-term (months) hospice patients, all over the age of seventy years old. While each person had their own private bedroom and bathroom, with space for family to gather, some larger rooms also included an attached sitting area that provided extra space. Additionally, the unit's floor plan included common meeting spaces—a large living room, dining area, and outdoor balcony, and separate rooms for a nurses' office, lounges, a library, a chapel, and a kids' playroom. While it was not the same as staying in a private home, it most definitely was not like staying in a hospital either. All floors, with the exception of the bathrooms, were carpeted. The furnishings were similar to those seen in a home or a nice hotel. Patients could decorate their rooms with wall-hangings and personal bedding, and stock shelves with favorite collections, family photos, and books. Most significantly, while the hospice physician and nurses were nearby and available to care for the residents of the hospice unit, they were not there to offer therapies, tests, or treatments. Instead, they were there to offer care and comfort as the individuals on the floor faced final illnesses and diagnoses that would end in death.

Death, in both general American culture and the subculture of American Christianity, is rarely a comfortable or popular topic. While certain facets of death seem glorified in holidays like Halloween or Day of the Dead, as well as through the increased popularity of skeletons in yard decor or skulls on trendy clothes, many people shy away from talking about, thinking of, or planning for the reality of death. I sought to explore this dichotomy of glorification and ignorance by examining death through a particular lens. Specifically, I came to know a community of people living and working in an inpatient hospice unit and immersed myself in their experiences in order to better understand what a healthy approach to the end of life can look like. In particular, I examined the worlds that those who were approaching the end of

their life inhabited. I paid attention to the choices they made—what they chose to do or not do, and what they chose to dwell on and talk about.

As I read and researched over a period of approximately four months, I began to identify some key anthropological themes that dovetailed with what I was learning about and witnessing in the hospice setting. Chief among these, and the main focus of this article, is the concept of liminality. Originally articulated by Van Gennep (1909), and later fleshed out by Turner (1991), the idea of rites of passage describes three stages one goes through as they transition from one 'world' or stage of life to another. First, they *separate* from their current world; for example, a child steps away from the world of childhood in preparation for entering a more adult world. Second, the person spends a period of time in a *margin*, or on the threshold of a new world. Turner (94) adopts the Latin word, "limin," which literally means threshold, to describe this time. Finally, during *aggregation* the person in transition reintegrates; this may mean they resume life in a new stage, or that they enter a new 'world,' such as the world after death.

Through examining themes, such as liminality, as well as retelling the stories of those I met in hospice, my hope is to begin conversations about death. C. S. Lewis (1996) wrote after the death of his wife, "It is hard to have patience with people who say, 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter.' . . . You might as well say birth doesn't matter . . . She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?" (15). If individuals, families, and church communities can begin to view death as an event that is as much a part of life as birth, and thus, as worthy of contemplation and discussion, we can also begin to move beyond our culture's dysfunctional poles of glorification and ignorance of death. By learning from the examples of those who go before us, I desire to demonstrate how we can learn to approach the liminal ritual of death in a healthier way, and thus claim and retain a measure of agency over an event that we all expect to face one day.

Anthropological Resources

Victor Turner (1991) is best remembered for building on and illuminating Van Gennep's (1909) 'rites de passage.' As I spent time with patients who seemed to dwell in a time and space between active life and death, Turner's work on liminality proved remarkably relevant. In major life transitions—or passages—such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, there is often a ritual marking three stages of the passage: a separation from the previous life, a period of transition, and then reentry into a new type of life. In this middle space—Van Gennep called it "margin"—it is as if the person is perched on the threshold between one life and another. Thus Turner adopted the Latin word for threshold, 'limin', and began referring to the period of margin as "liminality". In the forward to his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Turner explains that, ". . . in order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create—by structural means—spaces and times in the groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action" (1991: vii).

I discovered these spaces and times in the hospice unit. The patients were no longer moving about physically—nor even often emotionally engaged—in the routine everyday existence that I was coming from. Instead when I met with them, it was always in the same spaces: their rooms, or in the common areas on the unit's floor. When we talked, it was almost never about the current-day politics, news, or technology. Instead, I heard stories about World War II, or memories of talking on a party-line telephone. The people I met were not confused; most, despite some being of advanced age, were remarkably clear-minded. Rather, they were letting go, or separating, from the outside world and preparing for aggregation (Van Gennep's term) into a world to come after death.

While Turner's work on liminality focused on African tribal rituals, the concept transfers well to the ethnographic setting in which I was immersed. Death, looked at from the perspective of the liminal time period and space of hospice, bore resemblance to ritual. Indeed, Turner was one of the first anthropologists to really take a deep dive into the rituals of the societies he studied. He, however, credits Monica Wilson (1954) and her husband Godfrey, as the chief inspiration for his work. "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level . . . I see in rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies" (Wilson quoted in Turner 1991, 6).

Turner's work showed me the importance of transitory experiences in life that move us from one world into another. Yet I knew from my conversations with others, as well as my own observations about American society, that death was often treated with either ignorance or glorification. In other words, Americans—even Christian Americans—seemed un-comfortable with death. If, as Wilson postulated,

rituals hold a key to understanding society, what was I learning? At this point in the conversation, works by Michel Foucault and Nancy Scheper-Hughes helped me to more clearly understand what I was seeing. Scheper-Hughes's (1982) first book, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*, took a look at a society through a predominantly medical angle (specifically mental illness in rural Ireland). "I thought I would learn as much or even more about Irish society from the patients of the district mental hospital than I might from the village curate or schoolmaster . . . society reveals itself perhaps most clearly in the phenomena it rejects, excludes, and confines" (13).

Foucault (1965), in his book, *Madness and Civilization*, looks at the historic treatment of madness in Western society. Some level of dementia is often present once individuals reach an advanced age, causing moments of confusion and opacity. While Foucault's ideas could be applied broadly to these dementia-based moments of confusion and opacity, I found his insight on delusion[2] more helpful. I leverage his insights to help me make sense of "The Twilight Zone" of a patient's personal experience with delusions. Additionally, Foucault's work, like that of Scheper-Hughes, and Mary Douglas (2002), showed a side of society that is seen only through the weak, excluded, or marginalized. "As for a common language, there is no such thing; . . . the constitution of madness as a mental illness . . . thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words" (Foucault 1965, x). His book, he continues, is not about the history of the articulated sane majority, but of the 'silent' mad.

In seeking to move beyond either the glorification or the ignorance that death is accorded in society—in a sense, to listen for the silent language describing the reality of death—I utilized a variety of written sources. In a more practical vein, the mandatory and supplementary hospice training I received as a volunteer, as well as the wide variety of printed resources we were given, helped me to understand much more of the vocabulary and the process of natural death. From an anthropological perspective, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, by Bloch and Parry (1982), was a helpful collection of papers on death and funerary rituals from around the world. In particular, the discussion on good and bad death in the introduction provided key insights for my work.

Methods

Informal Interviews

The bulk of the research for this project was carried out simply by spending time with patients in an inpatient hospice care unit. I had already been volunteering to visit patients in this unit for about six months before obtaining permission to begin formally collecting experiences. I agreed to use pseudonyms for the patients, as well as blur certain identifying details, including the name of the particular hospice I was observing. I also agreed to abstain from taking photographs of the residents and of the facility itself to maintain greater anonymity. Nevertheless, the substance of the patients' experiences in hospice was retained.

I determined that face-to-face interactions with people receiving hospice care was a superior method to simply asking for written answers using a vehicle such as a survey or questionnaire. One reason for this approach was that I wanted to discover what the patients themselves deemed important to talk about as their death approached. Asking a preconceived series of questions would have inhibited this process. A second advantage for personal visits was the direct window that this provided into the patients' realities. For instance, I could observe the spaces within which they spent most of their time. I could observe their obvious physical symptoms—for example, difficulty breathing or walking, drowsiness, agitation, mottled skin, or confused speech. I could even observe changes from visit to visit in the patients I learned to know well.

The beauty of ethnographic research is the access to unique insights and personal stories that come as a result of deep observation and careful listening to individual people. A topic as broad as death, or even end-of-life care, seems nebulous and impersonal until we link it with the way it impacts a single story. Anthropology encourages looking through seemingly small windows to observe and make sense of the galactic vastness of the human experience.

Formal Interviews

In addition to my personal visits with residents of the hospice unit, I scheduled several interviews with

[2] Foucault's definition of dementia is intended in a more general sense, and should not be confused with the technical medical definition, elucidated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illnesses*, fifth edition, as involving acute brain failure.

hospice staff. I chose this method primarily due to the busy schedules of the persons I wanted to interview. I conducted two separate interviews with a hospice social worker. I also interviewed one of the hospice chaplains. For each of these interviews I developed some specific questions ahead of time. However, I was also open to learning about what the person being interviewed wanted to communicate with me. I was pleasantly surprised with the degree of openness and transparency from my respondents. The questions I asked generated the kinds of information I was seeking; in fact, I scheduled a second interview with the social worker to finish covering some of the topics we didn't have time for in the first interview! Their openness seemed to mesh with my own desire: to increase healthy dialogue about the end of life, not to 'sell' the concept of hospice in particular.

Cultivating Relationships with Staff

While I chose not to conduct scheduled interviews with the head nurse on the unit, as well as other hospice nurses and nurses' assistants, I cultivated relationships with the staff who covered the unit during the daytime hours, the timeframe during which I typically visited the hospice. I would check in with these nurses when I arrived or left—often telling one or more of them whom I hoped to visit, or whom I had visited that day—and I sought them out when I had a specific question about what a resident was experiencing or how a resident was doing physically or emotionally. These informal conversations had the benefit of focusing on what was happening in real time.

Participant Observation

Within the field of anthropology, 'participant observation' in the ethnographic process involves a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. "The ethnographer's personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation" (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 13). In other words, I was actively involved in conversations and in building relationships with patients and staff in the hospice unit. I was physically present. Yet I was also not a patient or a staff member. I could come and go at will. I was observing my surroundings without controlling them, trying to let the 'experts'—the dying themselves, their family members, and the hospice staff—guide my focus and teach me.

In the following section I will record many of the interactions I had with patients, whether conversing with them, or sitting by their bedside as they lay actively dying. I will also describe what I observed when I visited the hospice unit: the appearance of patients' rooms, the general layout of the unit floor, and the sounds of oxygen pumps, television shows, and music.

While no ethnography can fully capture a culture, my aim in conducting fieldwork was to utilize a variety of methods: formal and informal, subjective and objective, verbal and written. My hope was to produce a compelling picture with which a variety of readers, both academic and lay, can engage. Hearing from different voices, experiencing the hospice unit in various ways, and learning from other experts in hospice, and in the fields of anthropology and theology, can provide a starting point for teaching a different way of conceptualizing death.

Ethnography With Anthropological Analysis

The Space Between

"Good luck," two of the nurses' aides remarked as I told them who I intended to visit one morning. Bruce was new to the hospice unit, and he came from another part of the campus with a reputation. Although Bruce had declined most visitors, my supervisor felt I could handle his strong opinions and criticisms and recommended that I stop in to see him. With the less-than-helpful wishes from the staff, I set off to find the correct room. Though I had never been in this part of the hall before, Bruce's room's layout was identical to other rooms I was familiar with: a reclining chair in the corner by the window, a single bed by a wall of windows overlooking a small sitting room, and a series of built-in cabinets to hold clothes and possessions. I knocked on the door and introduced myself, peering around the wall dividing the sitting room from the sleeping area. Bruce was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, hooked up to a portable oxygen tank. Unlike Celeste, who always sat upright during our visits with both feet on the floor, Bruce was reclining a bit with his legs elevated on a footrest. He was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt that exposed arms blue with mottled blood. Talking seemed to exacerbate his wheeze and cough, but he was open to my visit and very willing to tell me about himself. First, though, he

commented on my use of a manual wheelchair to get around.

"I couldn't use one of those. But I can use a power wheelchair. I'd like to use one to ride over and surprise my wife, the way she surprises me when she comes over here."

Bruce and Cara's love story starts at a local roller skating rink, when she was 13 and he was just a "shy country boy". She asked him to skate, and then asked if he could take her home, beginning a four-year period of dating that led to a marriage that's still strong 73 years later. His wife is his favorite topic of conversation: "I'm just so proud of her," Bruce says, reaching a shaking hand toward a folder in his nightstand. He digs through a disorganized pile of hospice admittance paperwork until he finds a photocopied news article from the 1970s about his wife's promotion to police detective. Then he digs through another drawer until he finds an envelope of pictures: one showing his wife with her fellow police officers and another of his brother. "He died at age 19 in the Battle of the Bulge," he tells me.

"Oh, Bruce, that's so hard!" I exclaim.

"We were very close. But he died for something he believed in," he tells me. His acceptance of his brother's unfair death at such a young age seems almost unsentimental. Yet one of the few earthly possessions he still keeps close at hand at the end of his own very long life is a picture of the brother who didn't even make it to his twentieth birthday.

Many times, when I drive away after a hospice visit, I find myself fighting a sense of disorientation. I actually need to mentally prompt myself to pay attention to the roads and my driving because I feel like my mind is somewhere else. As I bid Bruce farewell and got in my van, I realized for the first time that I, too, am occupying a liminal space—in between the reality of inhabiting the world of memories with my patients and the reality of the present moment. I remind myself to stop and look both ways before turning left out of the health campus, my mind still ruminating over the loss of Bruce's brother. It's a bit like waking from a particularly vivid dream. Even after getting out of bed, you find yourself questioning if what you were just 'living' in your dream actually happened, or you feel your mind slipping back into the 'reality' you felt present to just a moment before waking. I continue my drive, and by the time I reach home, the presence of the past is fading.

Turner's (1991) focus of research centered on African tribes, specifically participants in tribal rituals. As these rituals varied, so too did the age and sex of the participants. In all cases, however, Turner refers to these participants as 'threshold people,' a term he intends to mean "ambiguous," "neither here nor there," and "betwixt and between," (95). During my visit with Bruce, he seemed to aptly fit Turner's definition of a threshold person. Yes, he still exists in the present world. He is still alive, and dealing with lack of oxygen, an annoying cough, shortness of breath, and the inability to independently ambulate around campus to see his wife. Yet our visit did not concentrate on the present. It was almost completely concerned with the past: Bruce and Cara's first date, the loss of Bruce's brother in World War II, Cara's career, and children they fostered.

Similarly, almost every hospice patient I have interacted with seems to dwell primarily in the past and define themselves to me through their personal history. I've heard many stories of how someone met their spouse. I've learned about individuals' careers, childhoods, and hobbies. While this situation is not completely surprising, upon later reflection, I found the trend puzzling. Why did most of the patients I met seem almost oblivious to their physical and emotional present? Did their choice to dwell primarily on their past suggest some sort of coping strategy in the face of a world without a future? Or was it simply a symptom of the way the human mind works as we age?

Liminality as a Battle Ground

Turner's seminal work, *The Ritual Process* (1991), speaks of the liminal stage of ritual being a space of preparation. As he studies various fertility, puberty, and initiation rituals among the Ndembu tribe of Central Africa, he portrays the actors as separated from their everyday life. In this period of liminality, the subjects undergo rituals that prepare them for the next phase of their life. For instance, a woman unable to successfully bear children enters, along with her husband, "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure" (96). The significant acts, words, and participants of these rituals are meant to repair the fertility problem and thus, prepare the woman and her husband to reenter society—normal life—with the ability to successfully bear children in the future. Likewise, a girl or boy in a puberty ceremony undergoes specific activities, or rituals, that prepare them to reenter society as a woman or man, rather than continue life as a child. Turner notes that those undergoing a period of liminality often exhibit "passive

or humble" behaviors (95). Ironically, this type of behavior seems to stand in stark contrast to the initiative of agency I observed in all stages of the dying process. Could this period of liminality—this 'thin space' between life and death—also be a battleground between agency and surrender?

Of all the patients I came to know, Celeste seemed to embody this struggle the most. Accustomed to being fiercely independent after her husband died, she came to the hospice unit angry and unhappy. Although she understood her need for more care, she was actively grieving the loss of her beloved apartment and her familiar routines. My introduction to her came about at the suggestion of one of the nurses, who mentioned Celeste had endured a rough night due to pain. Since I regularly experience the same kind of pain, she thought I could commiserate with Celeste and, perhaps, lift her spirits.

Unlike most of the other patients, Celeste did not introduce herself to me through her past. This difference in first impressions was not necessarily attributable to Celeste's degree of health or distance from death. She presented like many of the other patients that I visited: elderly, in pain, low on oxygen, and lacking much ability to ambulate independently. The difference, I believe, had much to do with Celeste's force of will. Opinionated, blunt, and feisty in temperament, she was still actively mourning the loss of living on her own in her apartment, with its familiar surroundings and life rhythms. She told me she was used to staying busy and doing things herself. When she was younger, she sang in the church choir, sewed all her own clothes, worked in her yard, meticulously cleaned her house, and canned and froze food. Now she complained that she has problems even picking things up without dropping them. This war between a zest for life and an impending death, between independence and forced dependence, brought an added dimension to Celeste's experience of the liminality of hospice.

"People say they want to live a long time, but it's not fun to be old," she said. In fact, Celeste seemed to want to skip over the whole ritual of dying and get right to the end, saying more than once, almost casually, that she would "rather be dead" than experience more pain and disability.

This war between surrender and agency manifested itself in the conversation topics Celeste chose during my weekly visits. Some days, I would hear all about the recent TV shows she had watched or the magazine articles she read. During my third visit, Celeste detailed her current morning cleaning routine: wiping down all the surfaces she could reach from her chair with baby wipes. The topic of cleaning, however, launched Celeste into the past, as she remembered the dogs her family had kept over the years and how difficult they were to clean up after. As the weeks went on, and Celeste became more accustomed to her new home, I heard less about the immediate past and witnessed her traveling deeper into her history in a way similar to that of the other patients I visited. Then one fall morning our conversation began with a jolt and subsequently introduced me to a new form of liminality.

The Twilight Zone

As I knocked lightly on her door and called her name, I realized that all the lights were off in Celeste's room and the curtains were drawn. When I came around the corner and saw her empty chair, I briefly thought that she must have left her room or traveled off-campus for the morning. Then I saw her lying in bed. This was unusual. As soon as she saw me, Celeste leaned forward and announced, "When you said you'd be back in two weeks to see me, I thought, 'no you won't, because I'll be gone.' I'm dying. I know I'm dying."

Somewhat stunned by both this stark announcement and Celeste's appearance—she was still in her nightgown and her hair was mussed and unwashed, a far cry from her usual tidiness—I stammered out a response, asking if she felt much worse.

"I don't mind that I'm dying," she continued, ignoring my question. "When you live as long as I have, you know to expect it."

Perhaps it was the surprise of Celeste's sudden announcement or her declined appearance that distracted me. It certainly took me some time to realize that her style of speaking this morning was different than that of previous occasions—more rapid, with less pauses taken to remember. As she soliloquized, it gradually dawned on me that what she was sharing couldn't be true. While some aspects of her story were familiar, like her favorite TV shows, other points seemed wildly improbable. Her former neighbor actually worked on her favorite TV show! He pretended he was blind and changed his name on the show, but she knew it was him because of his smile. Much of the story she had to tell me that day revolved around this man, 'Mike,' who kept morphing: from working on the television show, to impersonating Celeste's late husband, to being both a sex offender

and her neighbor, to becoming her building supervisor and a con man, to even being an employee of the very hospice unit Celeste lived in.

As I attempted to listen attentively and tried to act as though what Celeste was saying made sense, I also wrestled inwardly with what was going on. This didn't seem like the woman that I had come to know. She had often been forgetful before, but not paranoid and delusional. This elaborate, continuously transmuting story about Mike that she was relaying *couldn't* be true, but did that mean that nothing Celeste was saying to me today was true? And did the fact that the story wasn't true—but she believed that it was—mean that the delusional person telling it to me wasn't truly Celeste either?

In his exploration of insanity, Foucault (1965) writes of the need for those experiencing delirium to wake up. "Since delirium is the dream of waking persons, those who are delirious must be torn from quasi-sleep, recalled from their waking dream and its images to an authentic awakening" (184). Perhaps this is a helpful way of viewing delirium: existing in another version of reality, similar to the 'reality' we occupy when dreaming during sleep. Thus, it was as if I were given a window into Celeste's dream (nightmare?) world; a world usually hidden from view but made visible through a form of madness.

In essence, delirium is a kind of liminality all its own. The world Celeste was occupying on this particular morning was not fully the reality of the present moment or the reality of her past. Instead it was somewhere in-between, interweaving elements from both the past and the present alongside appearances of the bizarre. She knew who I was as she was relaying her monologue to me; we had established near the beginning of our visit that she remembered my name, the time I usually visited her, and where I lived. She also announced right away that she knew she was dying—another true facet of her current reality. Likewise, portions of her delirium included true elements from her past: her late husband made an appearance, and she referenced the two different apartment complexes she lived in after she and her husband sold their home. Yet this in-between, 'twilight zone' of delirium packed in a creepy man that kept popping up all over the place, and, later, statements to the nurse that her bed was wet and needed changing. (The nurse whispered to me that this, too, was untrue; however, she told Celeste they would change her sheets.)

After leaving Celeste's room that day, I checked in with the nurses to process what I had just experienced. They affirmed that Celeste had been mostly delusional for several days, ever since she had argued with her children over the weekend. The nurses thought the root of the argument was her children not believing what she was saying. At least, Celeste perceived that they disbelieved something she was saying—perhaps her strong belief that she was near death? As a result, the hospice staff had been trying to affirm her statements, however bizarre, as much as possible. For example, as mentioned above, the staff was changing the sheets on Celeste's bed because she believed that they were wet, even though they were actually still dry. The nurses hoped that as Celeste felt validated, her delusions would diminish.

Though delusions can be a sign that death is imminent, Celeste's type of delusions were not serving her well. They were scary, unsettling, and misleading. In essence, the nurses hoped that by validating Celeste, they could 'wake her up,' to use Foucault's terminology. While reducing distressing delusions may not ultimately prolong a patient's life, it will aid in making their preparation for the next leg of their journey more peaceful. In Celeste's case, when her delusions ceased, so did her preoccupation with death. A week later, she would declare that she had "rebounded," and she seemed to no longer believe that she was actively dying.

Ethnography With Theological Analysis

The Sacrament of Suffering

Eleanor looked small and birdlike lying in her bed. She was skeletal, had difficulty moving, and could no longer project her voice. But her face still bore evidence of a lifetime of smiles. Between brief periods of dozing, Eleanor told me that when she moved here, she had reconnected with a childhood friend who was also receiving care. She hadn't seen her recently, she whispered, "but when you get to be my age, people just disappear." In his summation of Van Gennep's (1909) 'rites de passage,' Turner (1991) delineates three stages: separation, margin, and aggregation (94). The majority of my time in this paper has been—like Turner's work—devoted to the middle stage, "limin, signifying 'threshold' in Latin" (ibid). We cannot, however, spend our lives poised on the threshold. In the ritual of death this means completing the journey

to whatever lies beyond, or in Eleanor's words, "just disappearing."

Schmemann (1973) notes that from a Christian mindset, disease—not health—is the 'normal' state of humans on earth. While the secular world attempts to defy disease and restore health at all costs, the Christian realizes that, in the words of Jesus, "In this world you will have trouble" (Jn. 16:33). Equating sacrament with the concept of passage or transformation, Schemann writes, "in Christ suffering is not 'removed'; it is transformed into victory. The defeat itself [death] becomes victory, a way, an entrance into the Kingdom, and this is the only true healing" (Schemann 1973, 102). Thus, for a Christian, death becomes not a battle, the enemy, an end, or even a final "disappearance," but rather a sacrament, or transition, from life to Life.

As patients move through the liminal period of life, transitioning into death, I've found that their desire for the spiritual grows more acute the closer they come to their final days. If they are a few months, or even a few weeks removed from death, they are often still focused on reminiscing, culling their lives for bits of wisdom, or remembering earlier activities and seasons of life. They may even show interest in the continuing activities of the world outside the doors of the hospice unit: political elections, the stock market's rise and fall, upcoming activities of their children and grandchildren, or major weather events. As they approach their time of active dying, or transitioning, however, these other foci fall by the wayside, replaced with a stronger desire for, and appreciation of, familiar scriptures and hymns, beloved poems, or blessings.

While I can only guess what patients are thinking in this final stage, I wonder if they reach toward the spiritual—whatever that looks like to them—due to a desire for comfort and a desire for preparation. In reflecting on her work as a hospice nurse, Hadley Vlahos (2023) writes, "In my experience, the people who are happiest at the end of their life are those who have achieved a sense of peace in regard to how they've lived, and who are comfortable in their belief about what comes next" (249). Additionally, the words of the scriptures and hymns suggested to us in our volunteer resources often focus particularly on what is to come, helping the dying to shift their focus from the scariness of the unknown to the hope of an anticipated future.

As persons reach the end of limin and anticipate an imminent cross over the threshold, their thoughts are rightly consumed by the new reality they are stepping into rather than the old reality they are leaving behind. In essence, according to Turner, that is the purpose of the liminal period; it is a time to slough off the old and prepare for the new. "It is as though [those in limin] are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (1996, 95). From a theological standpoint, the dying person is exchanging mortality for immortality. As such, their focus at the very end of life shifts from the "things of this world" to "the things above."

I'll See You On the Other Side

After the visit where Celeste announced that she was dying, I learned from the head nurse that her delusions had mostly abated, and she had even started getting out of bed again, claiming that she had "rebounded." Nevertheless, Celeste's food intake remained poor and she was very drowsy when I visited the next time—both common signs of diminishing life. Two weeks before her death, Celeste was back to spending most of her time in bed. Though she was still alert and would answer my questions, her voice was so faint I needed to lean close to her bed in order to hear what she was saying. One particular morning was bitterly cold with a layer of frost on the ground, so I asked Celeste about her opinion of snow. "Did you—do you—like snow?" I asked, inadvertently using the past tense with a woman who was still alive.

Ignoring or missing my gaffe, Celeste answered with her typical bluntness, "No!" She elaborated that she hated shoveling snow, especially when her family moved to a bigger lot with more space to clear. She also brought up the dogs—that she claimed to hate—again, remembering how they didn't want to go out when it snowed. Though I struggled to catch everything she said, I was pleased to see her smile as she reminisced, a success I recounted to the head nurse on my way out that morning.

I knew after that visit that I didn't have much time left to visit Celeste. Sure enough, the snow conversation was the last time I heard Celeste's voice. Two weeks later the hospice staff decided that Celeste was now actively dying. When I entered her room on my typical morning to visit the hospice, I knew that this would most likely be my last time to see her. The room was dim when I entered and Celeste was lying on her left side, wearing a pink, plush, button-down robe. Though the robe looked store-bought, the buttons down the front reminded me of the style of dresses she

sewed for herself and wore when I began visiting months before.

Celeste's eyes were closed, and her breathing was calm and even. She gave no indication that she knew I was there as I reached to hold her hand and started a one-way monologue. I reminded her of how much she had loved cleaning and cooking. I reminded her of the past places she had lived, including the beloved apartment where she had last lived independently. I mentioned her family members by name, and told her that she would soon see her husband again (whom she had lost suddenly a few years before). I commented on the weather; it was still cold enough to snow I told her, but her snow-shoveling days were finally done! She was allowed to rest.

After my life review, I pulled out a book of prayers and my Bible. When I finished praying, I read several passages from the Bible: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 and Psalm 23. Finally, singing over top of the hymns that were playing softly on CD, I sang "It is Well With My Soul." As I finished the last chorus, a nurse came in to change Celeste's sheets for the day.

"I don't need to interrupt," she said when she saw me. "I can come back."

"Just give me five minutes," I said.

Holding Celeste's hand one last time, I told her how much she had enriched my life in just the few short months I had visited with her. I thanked her for being willing to visit with me, for her unique spirit and sense of humor, and for her eye rolls. "I probably won't be back to see you before you go," I said, tears filling my eyes. "But I know where to find you. I'll see you on the other side."

Conclusion

Four months after Celeste died, I was sitting with another hospice patient in her sun-drenched room talking about dogs. Unlike Celeste, who talked a lot about dogs for not claiming to like them, this woman told me, "I never met a dog I didn't like." After a few minutes of chatting, Mary stopped talking and just gazed at the television playing in front of her. A year ago, I might have rushed to ask another question, to fill the silence, to make an excuse and flee. This time, though, I followed her gaze, and silently sat beside her, my hand on her bed, to watch *Perry Mason* on TV.

Talking about death is difficult. We don't like to think of our own mortality, and we don't want to think about life without those we love. Yet I hope recounting my interactions with hospice patients has demonstrated a few things that we can learn if we stop either ignoring or caricaturing death, and instead join the conversation without fear. Death, like birth, is a part of every human experience. We have long recognized the sacredness of birth, celebrating not only the moment itself, but the time leading up to it and immediately after it. For those choosing hospice care in the unit I observed, the time leading up to the actual moment of death became a liminal time of reflection, life analysis, rest, and preparation for the next reality. This liminal posture was teaching them the beauty of *being* in a world of doing. By allowing ourselves to journey along with our loved ones during this liminal time, we too can learn the beauty of being, and can witness the sacredness of this time on the threshold of a new reality.

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"Where Can We Find Ourselves?" Homelessness, Spirituality, and the Question of God

Paul H. Blankenship-Lai

This article asks what spirituality is like for young adults living on the streets of Seattle. It is based on more than five years of ethnographic fieldwork and is, as J. Derrick Lemons put it, "a theologically engaged anthropology" (Lemons, 2018). I demonstrate that, on the streets, spirituality is about cultivating a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world; tending the social wounds penetrating people soul deep; and connecting to *Something* that offers a power and purpose for living—while rejecting what is experientially otherwise. This article also demonstrates that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate on the streets because of the unloving social conditions that homelessness exemplifies. With the disappointments and possibilities of Christian love in mind, I conclude by imagining a new classroom within the school of Christian anthropology that (i) archives diverse practices of Christian love throughout space and time and (ii) cocreates *agapeic ethnographies* to help transform the unloving social conditions of everyday life.

"Where Can We Find Ourselves?"

I'd been looking for him. The last time I saw Apocalypse, he had found several love letters in a dumpster that were written from a prison cell.

"Apocalypse," I say. "How are you?"

He asks if I know a quiet place where we can rest, be and be let be. "At this time of day," he says, "I just want to disappear."

I suggest Christ Our Hope. The church sits below an apartment complex for 240 people who used to be homeless. It was opened in 2010 to help people grow in faith, hope, and love.

We walk through a metropolitan cacophony, in evening light and soft rain, with his dog, Golden Boy.

I step into the church, walk past a baptismal fountain, and sit on a wooden pew. Apocalypse and Golden Boy remain outside. When you are homeless for a while, going inside is a risk that might not be worth taking.

I sit before a statue of Jesus. As I rest my gaze on Jesus' face, I am overcome by the sound of a jackhammer digging into the black asphalt outside.

Apocalypse and Golden Boy enter the church. "Whoa," he says. Apocalypse did not ask the church's presence to wound him, but that is what happened.

Apocalypse looks at the fountain, the wooden pews, and the statue of Jesus. He sits down in the back of the church and leans against a marble wall. Golden Boy lies down beside him, sighs, and closes her eyes.

Apocalypse looks at Jesus—but then turns around and faces the marble.

"Funny," he says, "how many different things they can be. I fell in love with almost each one of you."

"I have a question," he says. "Where can we find ourselves?"

"I don't know," I say.

Looking at me and then into the marble, at Jesus, and then into the marble, he says: "You may not know it, but we are pure soul."

For a few minutes, I listen to a discourse—a kind of sermon from the back of the church, as I think of it now—about love and the spiritual nature of human personhood.

Apocalypse sits up and smiles. He is grounded. There is a peace about him.

"There is a Great Something here," he says. His fingers caress the marble. He is intimate with what is

present. "It gave me a message." Apocalypse says the Great Something told him to find four companions to help him find himself. He looks long at me and asks if I will be one of them. "But will the church allow it?"

"Go with Paul," he tells Golden Boy. Golden Boy sits at my feet. She cushions her head against the wooden pew. Apocalypse leaves the church.

An hour later, I found him again. He was sitting down with his back against the wall of McDonald's on Third Avenue. Before going home, before swimming in the lake, before cultivating spiritual freedom under water to understand and love what is different than me, I bought Apocalypse and Golden Boy a cheeseburger.

Figure 1
Reflection in the Marble

What's Happening?

Apocalypse is a person I spent time with on the streets of Seattle. For more than five years, I conducted ethnographic research to understand what spirituality is like on the streets and what difference it makes for the young adults who live there. I spent day and night there—hanging out, listening, and practicing homelessness as someone who, up until the end of my research, wasn't homeless. I found that everyday life on the streets is shaped by a conflicted network of federal, state, and local homeless service providers. I immersed myself in this network (which often is experienced as profit-driven, aloof, and uncaring by people who are homeless) and learned its practices and perspectives. I drank coffee with service providers, attended and facilitated workshops, and volunteered as a Christian "street minister." Between 2016-2019, I participated in an international team of theologians and social scientists studying faith-based responses to homelessness. Our purpose was to understand how religion matters in relation to homelessness—and we published the first volume on the subject (Costoya, 2021). In 2023, I received a Community Engaged Learning Faculty Fellowship at Seattle University. This fellowship afforded me the opportunity to learn how undergraduate students grapple with homelessness as they volunteered within the network of homeless services.

During my research, I wrote over 1,000 pages of fieldnotes, took hundreds of photographs, and transcribed nearly one hundred recorded interviews. Producing ethnographic insight *with* people who are homeless *about* spirituality was at stake. While spirituality had been explored in the anthropological study of homelessness before (Snow and Anderson, 1992; Liebow, 1993; Gowan, 2010), no ethnographic study had *centered* spirituality in the experiences of homelessness. I wanted to fill this gap in scholarly material about homelessness and spirituality. Inspired by applied anthropologists like Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Kim Hopper, and Tanya Marie Luhrmann, I also practiced ethnography to help reduce the unnecessary suffering that people who are homeless experience. At stake, for me, as a Christian, was a work of love that might efficaciously nurture diverse practices of love, Christian and otherwise, for people who live without homes.

I do not know what became of Apocalypse. I presume that he died by overdose or suicide, as this is a common end for street kids, though I hope otherwise. For me, Apocalypse is an archetype for the unhoused people that I spent time with. His life tells a common story about what everyday life is like on the streets, what differences spirituality makes there, and how people become homeless. Apocalypse is living on the streets of Seattle, which has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the United States. He is between 18-35. He despises religion—but practices diverse spiritualties that resonate with his experience in the world.

Apocalypse calls himself a "street kid" to distance himself from more stigmatized homeless populations (like elderly people living on the streets) and to name the cultures of resistance that unhoused youth create. The story about how Apocalypse began living on the

streets is complex. Any life story is fundamentally enigmatic, after all, and it is an epistemological violence to reduce human beings, who will always overflow our interpretive capacities, into fixed narratives (Levinas, 1961; Jordan, 2024). But what I learned about how street kids became homeless is consistent with what other homelessness researchers have found.

Before becoming homeless, Apocalypse's everyday existence—his "home world" as the late sociologist Peter Berger put it—was experientially uninhabitable (Berger, 1974). He couldn't stand to be inside himself. In childhood, he suffered devastating, repeated trauma (Coats and McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). At school, Apocalypse bore "enduring bullying" (Tyler and Schmitz, 2018). In his struggle to cope with the abuses that marred his life, Apocalypse's personal relationships fractured—and then his support system totally collapsed (Hopper, 2014). The limited employment opportunities that were available to Apocalypse didn't pay enough to support the cost of living (Goldstone, 2025). The shelters that he might have slept in were, for him, unsafe and dehumanizing—and would not allow his last loving attachment to the world, Golden Boy, to be inside with him (Donley and Wright, 2012). In this experiential uninhabitability of his everyday life, the streets allured Apocalypse (Janus, 1995). They offered a like-minded community (Smith, 2018), the freedom to be let be (Zigon, 2018), and enough humanitarian services to survive (Duneier, 2000). Apocalypse told me that he experienced home for the first time when he became homeless. He also told me that the home he found on the streets will eventually kill him—and that, in the winter months, when it's dangerous to sleep outside, he smokes meth to keep warm and would rather live in jail.

On the streets, Apocalypse tells me, he is treated by other people like a social cancer, and troubled by a seemingly failed promise of a personally loving God. He doesn't have access to adequate food, health care, and housing. He sees, from behind his cardboard sign, as materially wealthy individuals throw away expensive food, receive life-saving medical care, and host cocktail parties on their balconies. He makes friends on the streets that seem like family—until they bash his head with a baseball bat for the cell phone in his pocket. The police don't seem to care. He is terribly alone and yet leery of social contact. Apocalypse walks the streets wondering when to kill himself. He fears the world within and tries not to close his eyes. The President of the United States describes him as a violent insurrectionist polluting business and beauty (Trump, 2024). The Supreme Court, in 2024, ruled that he can be criminalized for sleeping outside. Apocalypse has come to think of himself as the enemy, the enemy. He says to himself and the ethnographer: "I cannot trust anyone on the streets, not even myself."

Remarkably, Apocalypse's pursuit of ultimate meaning, belonging, and love has not ceased. As Viktor Frankl observed, this pursuit, which we name "spirituality," is intrinsic to human personhood (Frankl, 2000). I found that, on the streets, spirituality is a fraught practice of trying to cultivate a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world. It is the pursuit of a presence that might tend the social wounds penetrating you soul deep. A simple "hello, how are you?" may be salvific balm. Or it could damn you into a paralyzing remembrance of your misery. You align yourself with a spiritual force you call "The Universe" to "manifest" (or make present) survival items in a dumpster. Like a handwritten wish for love from a prison cell—or an illegal substance that keeps you from freezing at night but may be laced with something that kills you. You reject a religious force that you think is rejecting you to experience one that may accept you. You listen for a "Great Something" with your back against the wall. You live wounded by love's absences. You wander the world in search of yourself and then, when you are too tired to move, and yet you cannot sleep, you sit down and hope against hope for a crumb of the economy. This crumb teaches you that maybe your life is still worth living and that *Something* is keeping you around for a purpose.

The purpose of this article is to describe how street kids in Seattle think about that *Something*—and what differences that thinking makes. The anthropological literature on homelessness has consistently shown that God concepts can be a consequential dimension in the experiences of homelessness—for good and ill. They may help an unhoused individual salvage their identity (Snow and Anderson, 1993) and experience a subtle but nevertheless transformative nurturance to help them get through another day, lest they otherwise kill themselves (Liebow, 1995; Dunlap, 2021). God concepts may also lead someone to blame themselves for their homelessness, ignore the structural causes of homelessness, and exacerbate mental unhealth (Gowan, 2010; Stivers, 2011). In this article, I will show that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate for young adults living on the streets of Seattle because of the wounding, unloving social conditions they experience. I will also show that the God concepts

street kids do experience—usually either (a) a negligent *Something* or (b) an abstract, higher power within—helps them sustain a purpose and power for living. I conclude this article with a proposal for the school of Christian anthropology, based on my finding about the experiential failures of Christian love, that might be of genuine service to the public. I encourage Christian anthropologists to (a) develop an archive on Christian love practices throughout time and place; and (b) cocreate *agapeic ethnographies* that might help the world better understand and transform the unloving social conditions of everyday life.

Letters to God

When I arrived in Seattle, I began collecting letters to God on a yellow notepad. "Hello," I would say. "I am doing research on how people experience God on the streets. Would you like to write a letter to God?" In exchange for a letter, I would offer cheap cigarettes. I wanted a letter to God from everyone who was homeless in Seattle, even if they didn't believe in God. In addition to deepening the study of homelessness, I reasoned that ethnographic insight about how people experience God might unveil further, unrecognized dimensions of social life. The way people think about and relate to God has been proved to be one of the most consequential influences on human persons (Froese and Bader, 2010). Max Weber, a founding figure of sociology, for example, argued that the anxiety-inducing, disciplinarian God of the early Protestant imagination produced the spark that lit modern capitalism aflame (Weber, 2001). For Sigmond Freud, a founding figure of psychoanalysis, God was a malady that the modern mind needed to be cured from (Freud, 1989). Martin Luther King, Jr. helped build a political movement to institutionalize black civil rights through his conception of a loving, socially liberative God (King, 1958). And more recently, the historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez has demonstrated that white evangelical nationalists legitimate their quest for political power through a hypermasculine, cowboy-like image of God (Du Mez, 2020).

One afternoon on "the Ave" in Seattle's University District, in front of an abandoned clothing store, a group of street kids rejected my offer. They didn't want to write a letter to God, not even for cheap cigarettes. The practice was anathema, and even laughable, because it seemed too Christian. Many of the street kids I spent time with, I came to learn, hate Christianity. Several referred to themselves as "Satanist" or "Luciferian." They would say "fuck you" to Christianity. Initially, it wounded me to hear street kids speak negatively about something that is precious within me. I judged them hastily and harshly. But, with time, their "fuck you" to Christianity became for me, a long and open ethnographic query. Though not without pain, I came to understand their rejection of Christianity as a potentially lifesaving (but not unproblematic) spiritual practice that helped tend the social wounds penetrating them soul deep (Blankenship-Lai 2025).

I put my yellow notepad away. I stopped asking for letters to God. Instead, I'd say, "Hello and how are you?" I'd listen deeply and hang out for long hours. I'd get to know someone living homeless before asking them to become information for my research. I tried to do an ethnography about spirituality *with* them, not *on* them (Ingold, 2018). I wanted to be a good, trustworthy presence in their experience of the world—even though I knew I would sometimes fail and, like every ethnographer, need mercy. After getting to know them, perhaps over coffee or a meal, I'd ask someone living homeless to talk about how they experience God. With the compassion and nonjudgement that I had access to, I would listen, ask follow-up questions, and stay around.

This is what I heard. I encourage you to read the stories below slowly.

December grew up in a small town in the Midwest. She said the Christian church that claimed to love her harassed her for being gay. December got on a bus for Seattle when she felt her life at risk. Seattle, she thought, would help free her from violence and allow her to be herself. December told me that, today, she isn't sure if God exists. "I have thought a lot about this," she said. We were sitting on the sidewalk. Our backs were against the glass doors of an abandoned Radio Shack. In purple and yellow and blue and red, she was drawing "Fuck the Ave" into her sketch pad. "There must be *Something* out there," she said. "How could all of this come from nothing?" "But," she went on, "it seems cruel to let people know that you are real, but then allow them to experience so much suffering. If *Something* exists," she said, "then maybe it's an alien in the seventh grade who created us for his science fair project. Now he hasn't seen it—he hasn't seen us—in eons. It's like we are collecting dust in his parents' attic."

Found, one of the first street kids I spent time with, created, as we spoke about God, an insightful link

between an abstract creator and human purpose. He showed me an open wound on his foot. We had been playing his guitar near Pike Place Market. As I strummed his guitar strings, Found told me that he is afraid to go to the hospital. He said he is worried that a doctor will look at his wound and say his leg needs to be amputated. "That will kill me," Found said. "I can't be homeless without legs." Found told me he is worried that the doctors will judge him and "not do shit for me anyway since I am homeless." When I asked Found about God, he become animated. I could tell, by attending to his body language, that the question really mattered to him. "I don't know what it is," he said, "but *Something* is keeping me around for a purpose." Found told me a story to illustrate the point. One night, he said, he went to sleep in a dumpster. He said it was raining, that he was "hella dope sick," and that the dumpster seemed like the safest place to sleep. The next morning, he woke up to the dumpster being picked up by a dump truck. He screamed and clawed and, somehow, he got out of the dumpster. That he got out in time, Found said, was a miracle. In his mind, it is evidence that *Something* is keeping him around for a purpose. While he thinks *Something* is keeping him around for an undisclosed purpose, Found sometimes wonders if *Something* is pulling a cruel joke on him. "Look around," he said.

Samantha prays, she said, but she isn't sure what she prays to. "I don't consider it a god," she said. "It is not like a person." Samantha tells me that she isn't sure "how the world was created and all of that. I do have a higher power, though," she said. "It's a really strong force." Samantha said she is open to her higher power being anything other than "a man in the clouds." What she knows for certain is that her higher power is kind. And good. That it cares for her. Samantha believes her higher power helps when she is dope sick, when she needs money to "get well," and when she is about to give up. She thinks that her higher power guides her life. Samantha told me that a "preacher man" once offered her a free hotel room while she was "flying a sign" in front of an ice cream shop. "He said he wanted to show me how much God loves me," she said. At first, Samantha didn't trust the preacher man. She feared that, in truth, he was a sex trafficker. "Something in my gut told me it'd be okay, though, and that I could trust him." Samantha said she is glad she took the offer. "I hadn't slept that well in a year," she said.

A few street kids didn't want to talk about God. For some, God just didn't matter much. "Total bullshit," Skate told me when we sat down for coffee on the Ave. When I asked him to elaborate, he just said it again: "total bullshit." For others, the question of God posed a serious mental health risk. Rage, who was "on the run" from the police for "selling a lot of drugs and really, really hurting someone," told me that people need to stop thinking about God. Solemnly, as we walked off the Ave and wandered between the trees on the University of Washington's campus to avoid being seen by the police, Rage told me that there are few things more hazardous than thinking about God. "God is the most dangerous question anyone could ask," he said. Rage told me that it has been scientifically proven that "pondering God" makes people clinically insane. "People commit suicide over God," he said. "Hundreds and hundreds of people every year." Shaman, who once happily shared intriguing thoughts about God as we walked the streets, told me one afternoon that he *had* to stop thinking about God. We were sitting on purple steps of an evangelical church. He looked distraught. "Thinking about God is making me crazy," he said. A few weeks later, Shaman went to a mental hospital. After three days in the hospital, Shaman came back to the streets thinking he might be the resurrected Christ and that I could be one of his 12 disciples.

Over a pot of coffee at Denny's, Plato told me that he would like to believe in a personal and loving God. "It just doesn't seem possible, though." For Plato, there is too little love and too much suffering for that to make sense. "Maybe it's like a creator," he said. "I mean," he corrects himself, "maybe the creator is like a painter who created a beautiful painting. It's like he makes it, sells it, and then moves on to the next one. Does he adore the painting? Sure. Maybe he even has pride in it. But love? Absolute love? I'm sure he doesn't want to see his painting absolutely go to shit or be destroyed," he says, "but honestly if it happened then could the artist move on to another painting? There may be some suffering there, but will it destroy God?" he asks rhetorically. "No."

"So," Plato says, "I don't know." He says he could come up with another analogy but that it won't get close to what he is trying to say. Like most street kids, Plato cloaks God language in hesitation and mystery.

Plato told me, as he finished his coffee and pancakes at Denny's, with his animal companion, Kali, at his feet, that he has one last thing to say. He said that his sense of God comes from a feeling, not a fact. He said he doesn't know what to call this feeling but that he feels it when he sees people smile, when he sees an elderly couple holding hands, when he hears a child

laugh, or when he is starving and someone gives him twenty dollars out of nowhere. "But there is another feeling, too," Plato says. "What really scares me," he says, "is that there might be no purpose. Like all this trying to be good and do the right thing is, in the end, for nothing. Like there is no deeper purpose to it. I hate to admit it," Plato says, "but I am afraid to believe there isn't *Something* out there."

What God Means and How God Matters on the Streets

How young adults living on the streets of Seattle spoke about God demonstrates four empirical points. First, God matters. The question of God, that is, evokes pressing existential concerns that most street kids think through—and that matters in their experiences of homelessness. Second, there is no single formula to describe how people talk about God on the street. The God language people use is often hesitant and ambivalent—and spoken about like a meandering riddle without end. God concepts also change on the streets, sometimes quite radically. The most anti-Christian person in my research (who delighted in the thought of setting fire to Christian churches), for example, became the only unapologetically Christian one. For many, moreover, the word "God" is refused—and "*Something*," "higher power" or "The Universe" is used instead. Third, the street kids that I spent time with, for the most part, did not believe in a personally loving God. If there is a person-like entity that exists outside a person, it was thought to be *Something* like a creator who abandoned creation, operates with a dismissive relationship to it, and only intervenes through acts of life-saving care. The Christian God, though culturally present and accessible to the imagination, did not survive the experiences of homelessness for the young adults that I spent time with. But even a distant and negligent conception of God, it must be emphasized—a *Something,* an alien-like God in the seventh grade—reminded street kids that their lives matter and might have ultimate purpose. Fourth, when discussed as a higher power or impersonal but benevolent force like The Universe, God was spoken of as an immanent power *in* the human person. This higher power could help make life livable by preventing danger and cultivating real joy.

One may wonder why the Christian conception of God fails to resonate on the streets. Five additional empirical points are important to consider. The first point is that, for the young adults that I spent time with, and an increasing number of people in the United States, the Christian God has been constructed and experienced in relation to a wounding, exclusionary political force (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Conservative political figures, for example,— like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Pete Hegseth, who have labored to reconstruct the United States into their version of Christianity—have created a god that is anathema for street kids like Apocalypse's wellbeing. Second, as a conscious and unconscious strategy to survive the streets, many street kids distance themselves from the political force(s) of Christianity, which they themselves often report being wounded by (Blankenship-Lai, 2025). Apocalypse turns from Jesus and leaves the church because, for him, based on what he has learned and experienced, Christianity has created too much suffering in the world. Third, due to the larger epistemological transformations that have placed us in an "immanent frame" (Taylor, 2007) and how enchanted our species has become by material objects (Cavanaugh, 2024), the possibility of experiencing a Christian God is less likely today than it was a few centuries ago. Apocalypse lives in a relatively new world, then—where his own existential survival does not depend on believing in God. Having faith in God is, therefore, as Tanya Marie Luhrmann puts it, very hard work in our time (Luhrmann, 2020). Fourth, the social conditions on the streets, which influence how Apocalypse makes sense of his life, do not suggest that a personally loving God is real. The unloving social conditions of street life make the hard work of faith in a personally loving God even harder—and, I have indicated, potentially damaging to one's mental health. In her masterful book, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study,* Ana-Maria Rizzuto demonstrated that only a deity meaningfully connected to the "warp and woof" of one's everyday life is likely to resonate (Rizzuto, 1979).

Paul Farmer and Loïc Wacquant have argued that the local, marginalized worlds that anthropologists study are inevitably shaped by geopolitical forces and structural violence—and that it is a mistake to neglect their presence in ethnographic analysis (Farmer, 2001; Wacquant, 2002). Apocalypse himself, though homeless, isn't naïve to the geopolitical forces that wound his life and influence his spirituality. He reads the paper, listens to the news, and took classes in social science at school. Apocalypse knows that Seattle, and the United States more broadly, came into existence through the genocide of Indigenous people and the slave labor of

black and brown bodies (Asaka, 2023). He understands that people are on the streets because they do not have homes, that they do not have homes because they cannot afford them, and that they cannot afford them because they are quantifiably unaffordable (Colburn and Aldern, 2022). Though he doesn't know the numbers, exactly, he is mindful that homelessness and housing insecurity aren't peculiar to the United States. In point of fact, globally, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing, 883 million live in slums, and 22 million are displaced every year due to the climate crisis (Salcedo, 2018). Apocalypse is not surprised when he learns, on a public health poster plastered on a traffic sign by an anarchist, that suicide is a leading cause of death for people of all ages—his own suffering, after all, is itself an international story about how the world cares more for profit and power than human and nonhuman wellbeing (CDC 2024; Amrith 2024). Apocalypse sees the world on the streets of Seattle and the Christian God of love does not seem present there.

Figure 2
Dumpster Living

Conclusion: A Possible Future for Christian Anthropology

In this article, I queried what spirituality is like for young adults living on the streets of Seattle. I demonstrated that everyday life on the streets is constituted by a confluence of social wounds that violently penetrate the human person soul deep. I showed that, on the streets, spirituality is about cultivating a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world; tending one's social wounds by connecting to *Something* that brings a purpose and power for living; and by *rejecting* what is experientially otherwise and antithetical to one's wellbeing. This article also showed that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate on the streets because of the unloving social conditions of everyday life—conditions all too prevalent around the globe—and that, when street kids ponder God, they are likely to imagine *Something* like (a) a negligent creator or (b) a higher power within.

What does it mean to be a Christian Anthropologist in the global catastrophe of homelessness? How shall we answer Apocalypse—and the other figures who, whether homeless or housed, call to us, and perhaps *A Great Something,* as they search for themselves? I will make three proposals in the pages that remain. At stake is a seed for reflection that might bloom into an institutionalized project on Christian love throughout time and place, be made accessible for the public good, and help people like Apocalypse find themselves. I want, in the conclusion of this article, to imagine a compassionate "classroom", outline a workable research objective, and sketch a new ethnography that can be practiced in diverse local worlds where we can learn together how Christian love can become more loving. I also want to create hospitality for constructive critique and (re)formation, knowing the limits of my perspective and the preciousness of collaboration, Christian and otherwise.

First, may we be encouraged. May we begin with what is already good. The *raison d'etre* of this journal is the cultivation of a distinctly Christian school of thought within anthropology. The founders of the On Knowing Humanity Research Project—which included five anthropologists, three theologians, and a historian—created an anthropological subfield informed by theology and analogous to Marxist, feminist, and Indigenous anthropologies. Our consistent argument has been that anthropology undermines itself when it excludes and denigrates religiously committed perspectives (Meneses and Bronkema, 2017). Moreover, the panoply of human experience is, we have claimed, impoverished without respect for the multifaceted Christian standpoint(s), which are not reducible to the follies and violences of human beings and the institutions they create. This work of creating a Christian school of anthropology has born considerable fruit, as we can see. We have developed a robust epistemological foundation for how theological insights can advance anthropology and demonstrated how ethnography can be practiced Christianly. As a result of our efforts, we have been

recognized by the most esteemed anthropologists of our time and published in leading anthropology journals.

My second proposal is that we remember that we still have important work to do. The world appears more divided than when On Knowing Humanity started, not less. We are facing apocalypse and cannot look unaware. Christians are accountable for much of the divisiveness that marks our world—as we are responsible for indispensable, exemplary peace-making. Christianity is also always changing—and implementing theologies and spiritual practices in local worlds with global impact that may have good intentions but inadequate evidence of efficacy. Christian anthropologists are in a unique position to enter different Christian field sites, explain what is happening from their unique standpoint, and communicate their findings truthfully for the benefit of a more peaceably pluralistic world.

My third proposal is about a new possibility for Christian anthropology. It is about how to "grow the good" that we have created, should the collective winds of discernment move us freely into this unknown. But maybe "new" isn't the right word. What I am proposing is that we make more explicit what has always been at least implicit in our work, which is an attempt to serve God through new practices of love (Howell and Paris, 2010). Here, I put my hands into our epistemological dirt, gather some theological and anthropological material, and imagine a classroom. This "classroom" within our school would be a compassionate space that focuses on diverse practices of Christian love throughout time and place. It would query the histories, theologies, and observable efficacies of diverse Christian love practices. This classroom would chronicle Christian love practices with the resources of anthropology and theology, put the practices into an archive, and make the archive accessible for various publics. Through what I call *agapeic ethnographies,* this classroom would also train Christian anthropologists and theologians to conduct research in different local worlds for the purpose of learning how to love them. By love, I am referring to the divine, nonviolent force, which Jesus embodied in his life, that works for the real, observable good of others without expecting anything in return (Keller 2007; Oord 2022). This classroom would also grapple with why Christian love fails to resonate and be experienced as loving. The work of this proposed classroom—its historical and contemporary archive on Christian love—would produce ethnographic material for use in university classrooms, faith-based organizations, popular media, and public policy. It would also help fill an identifiable research gap in theology and the social sciences. As Christian Smith has argued, our capacity to understand social life is currently derelict because social scientists have, by and large, failed to take Pitirim Sorokin's recommendation, (Sorokin, 1950) and study love seriously (Smith, 2015).

It is important for both Christianity and anthropology that a respected school of *Christian* anthropology exists within anthropology. The world is a more tolerant, beautiful place with sophisticated anthropological research from diverse Christian standpoints. It is also important, however, for the Christian anthropologist to cultivate spiritual freedom from anthropology—and any academic discipline, including theology—that is created by human creatures and inevitably formed by social powers that may undermine Christian values. Our call is not, in the end, of course, to professional success, epistemological validation, and institutional survival. The slow, painful work of opening our souls, by grace, to the lives of different creatures in different local worlds for what might become transformative ethnographic insight that freely and without force loves lovingly, is, I propose, our call. And our joy.

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Soccer's Holy Grail: Interrogating the Preponderance of Fandom over Faith in the age of Globalization

Stephen C. Nnadi and Kanayo L. Nwadialor

Every religion has practices and values which help it to retain its adherents and give it a sustainable identity. However, whenever the values of a particular religion appear to no longer satisfy the yearnings of its adherents, a gap is created. With the advent of globalization, many religious practices are being subjected to scrutiny. This article examines the emergence of football (or soccer) in the modern world, describing its evolving influence as a new religion in the secular society. Through the analysis presented, and with participant-observer findings, we show how strong the influence of football has become across the globe, especially in Nigeria. The article reveals that modern football has presented an irresistible attraction to those dissatisfied with religion, and has bonded soccer-loving fans to common goals similar to, or even more intense than, those seen among adherents of religion.[1]

Introduction

In modern times, the commonly accepted definition of religion as a belief in a supernatural power or powers that control human destiny has seen the need for adjustment. Religious belief incorporates the institutions that make the expression of belief possible. Thus the religions of the world have been organized, over the centuries, to cater to the spiritual and psychological needs of their adherents. Modern times have witnessed an overall marked decline in religious beliefs and practices, especially in the developed countries of the world. This decline however, has not stopped popular activities and pastimes being pursued with "religious" zeal and fervor.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology. When investigating a relatively unknown phenomenon, a qualitative study is usually appropriate if there are sufficient resources for review (Hancock & Algozzine 2017). It is an exploratory approach which allows for a phenomenon to be studied within its context. A qualitative study allows for data from multiple sources to synthesize wide perspectives and allows for an in-depth investigation.

Data for the study was elicited from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source was mainly participant observation of both religious and soccer activities within the study area. The rationale for participant observation was to gather new knowledge on the subject matter. The primary data was supported with secondary data such as literature, magazines from international soccer organizations, media reports and journals. Asika, (2006) has declared that the usefulness of secondary sources of data lies in the fact that information of this sort is collected periodically. Also, gathering of information from such sources does not require the cooperation or assistance of the individual about whom information is being sought. The sources of data for this study include: magazines, newspapers, textbooks, journals and seminar papers among others. Content analysis was adopted as our method of data analysis. The study location is Eastern Nigeria. Eastern Nigeria is a very religious area, with a combination of Christian and traditional worshipers,

[1] The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, nor has there been any funding for the work.

but also is a place where football is followed with great enthusiasm. The data was interpreted through phenomenological analysis and narrative description.

Modernity and Modern Times

Modernity is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been defined and redefined across various disciplines and perspectives. However, in the main it involves a critique of traditional authority, customs, and beliefs, and the pursuit of new forms of knowledge and understanding. It is marked by the differentiation of social institutions, such as the separation of church and state, characterized by critique of tradition, enlightenment values, increasing rationalization, increased global connectivity, cultural exchange, and the emergence of cosmopolitan identities and bureaucratization of social institutions, leading to greater efficiency, predictability, and control. Modernity celebrates the diversity and hybridity of cultures, identities, and lifestyles, the rise of consumer culture, mass media, and popular culture, which shape our perceptions and experiences of the world. Modern times, on the other hand, refer to the contemporary era, which is characterized by diversity, fragmentation, and experimentation, marked by the rise of new forms of art, literature, and music, significant technological, social, economic, and cultural changes; a period of increased cultural exchange and homogenization, driven by technological advancements and globalization. The modern era is marked by the recognition and celebration of diversity, with a focus on promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and social justice.

Religion and Globalization

Globalization in the context of this paper means the speed-up of movements and exchanges of human beings, goods and services, information, capital, technologies and cultural practices all over the world. It has significantly increased and promoted the rate of interaction between populations and regions of the world. Lee and Kim (2016) opine that religious beliefs were among the earliest cultural elements to globalize, being spread by force through conquest, migration, evangelization, colonization and through international relations, trade and commerce. The collapse of colonialism which was followed by globalization led to the development of international corporations, global mass transportation and global mass media under the impact of science and technology. Invariably, since the 1960s and 1970s, new patterns of religion have appeared that reflect a global consciousness. With this have emerged religions shaped by science and technology. Arguably, sports in general and soccer in particular, which draws a large diversity of people and cultures under a common interest, is also a new religion shaped by modernity.

Globalization has also contributed to the alienation of some individuals from their traditions, and has expanded recreational opportunities by spreading music, fashion and sporting activities through the internet and satellite television which provides massive information across geographical boundaries in little time. According to Lee and Kim (2016), in the area of sports, globalization has impacted the way in which sports are organized and conducted, and has also changed people's perception of sporting activities in modern times. The roots of modern sports can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century in Great Britain and the United States of America where the first professional sports were organized in mining and industrial towns and cities. Wright (2002) states that then, competition was done mostly on the local and national level. The first signs of globalization in sports were aided by British colonization and influence which popularized sports such as football, rugby, and cricket in its colonies worldwide. Such sports gradually replaced traditional games. This gradual but steady development led to the formation of the International Olympic Council in 1894 and the first Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896.

As it relates to football, the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) was formed in 1904, and the first ever World Cup was held in 1930 in Uruguay. FIFA as a federation has member associations in 209 countries and is one of the most famous examples of institutionalization in the world: its membership exceeds that of the United Nations Organizations (U.N.O.). Globalization in sports was subsequently fueled by the progress made in technology and the commercialization of sports. Print and electronic media exposed sports to a wider international audience, especially television, with the first televised soccer World Cup being held in 1956. This increased involvement of global telecommunication companies allows international sports organizations and federations to generate enormous revenues through the sale of television rights. Television has also aided the promotion of local and national leagues and teams in overseas markets to gain an ever widening audience. Thibault (2009) notes that

the diversity in athletes' origins and participation in national professional leagues has increased around the world, along with the number of countries participating in various sporting events.

Soccer as a Religion

Football, in the context of this paper is the round-leather game played by eleven members of two opposing teams to out-score their opponents in goals past two posts in order to win. Games in the ancient Greek world had significant religious coloration in that they were mostly held in honour of the "gods" of the Greek pantheon, and individual athletes sacrificed and prayed to their favorite gods and goddesses for victory. Likewise, sports in modern times seem to have taken on religious dimensions of their own. According to Barber (2009), psychologists are coming to the conclusion that sports have many of the same effects on spectators as religion does on its adherents. Wann (2001) states that the similarities between sport fandom and organized religion are striking considering the vocabulary associated with both: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival and celebration. It may seem odd to equate religion with sports entertainment, but it must be understood that before the advent of modern mass communication, religious ceremonies were a source of entertainment for ordinary people who rarely attended a theatre or travelled to a sporting event. Scholars refer to some sports prevalent in an area as "national religion" or "humanistic religion", pointing out that spectators worship other human beings because of their achievements and the groups to which they belong.

Wann (2001) compares sports stadia to "cathedrals" where followers gather to worship their heroes and pray for their success. He states that if rituals may be entertaining, then entertainment as experienced in a sports stadium may be ritualistic when fans wear the team colors and carry its flags, icons and mascots. The ritual then goes on to include the repetitive chanting of team encouragement, hand-clapping, booing the other team, doing the wave, and so forth. He then concludes that the singing of an anthem at a sporting event likely has similar psychological effects as the singing of a hymn in a church.

The activities of sports fans as a group can be said to be religious. In Africa, as religious attendance rates have been dropping drastically in recent decades, interest in sports spectatorship, especially soccer, has soared significantly. Fans are religiously committed to their favorite sports stars and teams in a way that provides a focus and gives meaning to their daily lives. In drawing the parallels between sports and religion, Wann (2001) notes that sports spectatorship is a transformative experience through which fans escape the stress of daily living just as religious experiences help the faithful to transcend their every day existential problems. In corroboration, Serazio (2013) states that the notion that sports remain modern society's civil religion is truer than we often accept. In fandom, as in religious worship, our social connections are brought to life in the stands as they are in the pews. Emile Durkheim suggested that aboriginal tribes worship their society through totems. Similarly, soccer enthusiasts share and reaffirm their relations with one another through the love of the common team they support. The sports totems, like T-shirts with the images of devotion-drawing celebrities, give the fans the motivation to warm up to and strike up a conversation with strangers. Also, being loyal to the fandom of a particular club can make people challenge others with allegiances to rival teams, treating them with the same attitude of alienation familiar to heretics and apostates in religion.

Block (2009) notes that Durkheim was also preoccupied with the notion of "collective consciousness"—the idea that religion plays an important role in uniting members through the creation of a common consciousness. With the idea of a common consciousness in mind, it is easy to see how sports is a religion, as common consciousness results from the ecstatic communal worship that is seen throughout the sporting world, especially in football where fans unite as one, and even riot for a common goal. One can hear what sounds like worship while attending a sporting event as the stadium roars with the sound of supporting their team, setting the stage for Durkheim's "collective consciousness" to unleash passions in the crowd. This is evident in almost every sport, as passion can blossom into fanaticism and acts of hooliganism.

McLellan (2008), in reference to Karl Marx's religion as "the opiate of the people", asserts that soccer is a new opiate that has arisen for the people, and is in its own way a new religion. He states that football "inspires more devotion and fervor than its tired counterparts that were still mired in the doctrines of yesteryears" (p. 18). As this new phenomenon has gripped people across the world, it has led to the

construction of stadia that in effect become the churches of the religion, where the "faithful" can visit to see the prophets (players) they admire conduct their demonstrative sermons from week to week. Fans follow their teams across the world to be there when the team they love and worship is crowned champions of some kind, and managers and players are admired like saints and prophets. He concludes with what he calls a condemnable but undeniable fact that football has crossed into the territory of religion in Argentina, where anyone who so desires can visit the "Church of Maradona" and worship with the devoted followers of the "god," Diego Maradona, the late soccer superstar who helped Argentina win the soccer World Cup in 1986.

Noting the similarities between football and religion, Juricic (2013) states that in religion petition (prayer) is made to gods, just as in football high expectations are placed on the players. Furthermore, when true believers are disappointed by their gods, and true fans disappointed by their players, the latter still continue to believe in the former. Also a believer feels connected with a god when praying in the same way a fan feels connected to his/her team when singing an anthem. In the same parallel manner, morality, punishment and hell enforced by God as preached by religion are synonymous with a referee with a red card sending sinners out of the kingdom (pitch) for breaking the rules of the game.

Football functions as a religion in that millions of followers every week enter the "churches" (stadia) across the world in the hope of experiencing glorious moments of soccer action that they will remember for the rest of their lives. Football entertainment, cum obsession, will no doubt endure for generations to come and will remain part of people's collective consciousness alongside other religions that control so much of their world. Devotees continue to enjoy the spectacle soccer affords, and hope for the miracles that sometimes happen in the form of rallies, spectacular come-backs, and fantastic goals. In spite of the sins of the "religion"—like careless acts that lead to un-necessary penalties, own-goals, administrative incompetence of coaches, and the economic exploitation of the players—the magic of football is unabated.

For Juricic (2019) the "civil religion" proposed by Rousseau has beliefs, values, and practices that the adherents deem sacred and put complete faith into. In the sporting world, a similar practice is observed when many fans put their complete faith into their favorite teams, treating each game as if it were a sacred ritual. Each team has a well known symbol or logo, and whether fans fully understand the meaning of the symbol or not, the sight of it provokes their inner passion and activates their emotions for the team. Block (2009) cites James Mathisen as comparing the symbols found in sports halls of fame to the remembrance of saints that have passed on in religion.

Sports is a very powerful religion which gives a sense of belonging, identity, and self-worth. The worship that is practiced in sports, especially football, is like no other; the feeling of sitting in a crowded stadium with other fellow "worshippers" gives an electrifying sensation. Football has many believers and followers who spend money and travel to their favorite stadia to see their "gods" perform first-hand. It usually incorporates a faith that is so strong that it leaves the fans of the losing teams weak and dejected. In some cases, distraught fans are known to behave irrationally, and in extreme cases, some commit suicide.

Soccer qualifies as a civil religion because of its ability to bring different people together and give them shared values, expectations and identity. This comes with an accompanying sense of group, regional, or national feelings of pride and patriotism for the winning side, and sadness and sorrow for the losers. More so, the celebrities in the form of star coaches, players, and clubs become status symbols as well as the "deities" and cult personnel that keep the religion going. These are comparable to ancestors, heroes, saints, and martyrs who both motivate and consume the adoration, worship, and praise generated by the teeming followers.

Xifra, cited in Lopez (2019), defines "civil religion" as a religion that demonstrates both the moral and spiritual values of a community or modern society involving myths, symbols and public rituals. In exploring the notion of football as a religion, he conducted studies that spanned five continents and came up with interesting findings. From the research, Argentina's Diego Maradona transformed himself from a mere soccer star into a national symbol of worship. For the Italians, soccer is a product of religious intervention, and in India, the religion of soccer was used to reinforce British morals and ethics. Amongst the Tanzanians, reflecting the African experience, the casting of mystical spells practiced in traditional religion became essential for achievements to be made in soccer, while Mexicans incorporated the tenets of Catholicism into their viewing of soccer.

While soccer fandom may not be traditionally considered a religious movement, it can indeed share some similarities with new religious movements (NRMs). This is because soccer fans engage in rituals like chanting, singing, and performing specific gestures, which can be seen as sacred practices. Soccer fandom provides a sense of community and belonging, much like traditional religious groups. Fans share a common identity and bond over their love for the team. Soccer teams have rich histories, symbols, and myths surrounding their origins, successes, and failures. These narratives can take on a mythological quality, similar to those found in religious traditions. Soccer fans exhibit intense emotional investment in their teams, which can be comparable to the passion and devotion found in religious movements. Fans travel to stadiums, which can be seen as sacred spaces, to watch their teams play. These pilgrimages can be emotionally charged and provide a sense of connection to the team and fellow fans.

Soccer fandom does not typically involve spiritual or supernatural beliefs, which are core components of most religious movements. Instead, soccer is a secular activity, and fandom is primarily focused on entertainment, socialization, and community rather than spiritual growth or enlightenment. Soccer fandom is often fluid, with fans switching teams or allegiances over time. This flexibility is not typically characteristic of religious movements, which often require a deeper, more committed adherence. But it can be argued that soccer fandom can be seen as a form of "civil religion" or "secular ritual," which provides a sense of community, identity, and shared experience, but without the spiritual or supernatural elements that define traditional religious movements.

Fundamentalism and the Growth of the Football "Religion"

The fundamentalism that leads to fanaticism and its resultant extremities that obtain in religion also have parallels in soccer. Soccer exerts a huge impact on cultures around the world through its ability to function as a global religion. With something as powerful as soccer, the possibility of abuse is present, as passion for the game can have a better part of one's mind and affect judgment. Kenney (2019) states that with something as powerful as soccer, the possibility of a negative consequence is always present, as passion for the game can dominate one's mind and becloud judgment. Citing Andres Escobar's assassination after his inadvertent own-goal while playing for his country, Colombia in the 1994 World Cup, which resulted in Colombia's elimination from the tournament, he posits that Escobar became a religious martyr whose death epitomizes the violence that can result from a passionate outbreak similar to the ones caused by fanatics in religion. Escobar's gruesome murder for making a mistake in the field of play forever remains a sad symbol of the severity with which devout fans revere and worship soccer.

West (2016) asserts that in modern times, Karl Marx's position that religion is the opium of the masses has ceased largely to be obtainable in the developed countries of the world. Organized "spiritual" religion with its belief in the supernatural used to serve the purpose of providing hope and salvation, and encouraging people to accept their lot in the world without disturbing the social order. But modern scientific advances have subjected long-held creeds and practices to scrutiny and doubt, rendering many religious beliefs untenable to post-modern minds. For them, the few remaining religious practices being undertaken are a mere formality. West further postulates that this does not mean that there is no longer a need for Marx's "opium of the masses". As the world is still unfair, and death is still inevitable, another powerful source of emotional support has crept into the void once occupied by Jesus and his disciples, which is football.

With devotion to football becoming extreme, the football flocks have large capacity stadia as their places of worship substituting for the once grand but now sparsely populated and deserted temples and cathedrals. Other areas of substitution are club chants and anthems (like the popular UEFA Champions League anthem) in place of religious hymns; soccer stars and distinguished coaches like Messi, Ronaldo and Jose Maurinho in place of revered saints; club logos, T-shirts and flags in the place of religious symbols and artifacts (like the Christian cross); team clashes like Chelsea versus Manchester City, or some other explosive derbies in place of theological and sectarian disputes in religion.

The hope that religion used to solely offer abounds in football, as fans can live and hope for the next game, the next season or tournament, hoping that their team might win some silverware and soccer glory the next time around. When an unexpected under-dog team wins a league or tournament, the pleasant shock and elation can make the team supporters believe they

have experienced heaven on earth, having realized their wildest dream. The fans might not believe in God, or may have distanced themselves from organized religion, but ultimately they find their new "gods" in their trail-blazing players and coaches. With this development, the number of church-goers and participants in other religious activities is now universally dwarfed by the number of people who regularly attend football matches and tournaments, and in many ways, the social functions of football bear a more than passing resemblance to the role formerly played by religion in the western world.

Waalkes (2017) has also explored the challenges soccer has posed to traditional religion in the modern world. For the majority of young people, and a good number of adults, the "Big Game" as soccer is often called, competes fiercely with religious responsibilities for the attention and time of the adherents regarding active participation. The amount of time spent on soccer compared to the commitment to religious and other activities is a problem which religious groups and communities cannot ignore. For young people especially, the sphere of soccer entertainment has been expanding at the expense of religious activities, and serving football as an idol to the detriment of the worship of God. Soccer schedules are more appealing liturgies than church services. For the younger generations, the names and the bio-statistics of top strikers in world football are far better known than the saints of any religion, and their exploits much more popular and widely discussed than matters pertaining to religion. This is in sharp contrast with religious topics that often divide people of diverse religious backgrounds, and which seem sectarian and irrelevant, engendering bias, and ending without finding areas of common ground on belief and creeds. Waalkes concludes that "global football looks like a rival to the great religions, contributing to secularization, or more accurately, luring people to an alternative form of sacralization."

Maller (2016) is of the opinion that the World Cup acts as a religious ceremony similar to the Christian Christmas, as over one billion people simultaneously watched the 2014 World Cup final in Brazil. Soccer's incredible reach makes it the most prevalent global religion today. Juricic (2013) asserts that when the newly enthroned Pope Francis spoke at the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2013 and commented that "Jesus is more important than football," it was not really an effective way to attract people to Christianity in a country as soccer-mad as Brazil. The Pope's spirited attempt at highlighting Jesus in a Roman Catholic-dominated country points to a subtle, but real, clash between two different very strong religions in Brazilian society, where most people, though Catholic, are addicted to football. Sports, especially football, is clearly not only a physical activity but a strong social and emotional phenomenon that has tremendous influence on all spheres of human life—including politics, economics, and international relations. Hundley (2016) rightly asserts that the soccer World Cup that comes around every four years is soccer religion's hero-making machine, and that it is akin to deification and canonization in religion. During the fiesta, new "gods", saints and villains are made on a global scale and with wide acclaim, depending on the performances of individual players and managers.[2]

[2] In some places, the exclusion of women from football for religious reasons is a complex and multifaceted issue. Some theological traditions have historically interpreted religious texts in ways that justify the exclusion of women from certain activities, including sports like football. This theological perspective posits that men and women have different, complementary roles in society. Some proponents of complementarianism may argue that women's exclusion from football is necessary to maintain these distinct roles. This perspective further assumes that men and women have inherent, essential differences that determine their abilities and interests. Essentialist theology might be used to justify the exclusion of women from football based on perceived physical or emotional differences.

Some Christian theologians have interpreted I Corinthians 11:2-16 as prohibiting women from participating in activities that require physical exertion or competition, such as football. 1Timothy 2:11-12 is another biblical passage that has been used to justify the exclusion of women from certain activities, including sports. Some Islamic theologians have also interpreted certain Quranic verses (e.g., Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:59) as prohibiting women from participating in activities that might lead to immodesty or exposure. However, despite historical exclusion, women's football leagues have emerged and gained popularity worldwide. FIFA has launched initiatives to promote women's football and increase participation and feminist theologians, activists, and advocates continue to challenge theological justifications for women's exclusion from football, promoting inclusive and equitable perspectives. So while some theological perspectives have historically justified exclusion, counter-theological perspectives and real-world initiatives are promoting inclusivity and equality.

The Cases of Argentina and Brazil

The common characteristic of many religions is the belief in supernatural beings who possess special powers, are worthy of worship, and who have existential impact on human beings. As with Marx's "opium of the people," Juricic (2013) notes that football distracts people and dictates their way of life, influences their behaviour, and makes people to experience transcendental feelings in stadiums, in front of the television and elsewhere, especially in bars. As in religion, football does not really have specific gods or deities, but has a lot of heroes that are depended on and worshipped as "gods" by fans. In line with this, Kenney (2019) states that in some cultures, soccer has become so deeply rooted in society that certain players are regarded almost as deities. In Argentina, thousands worship Diego Maradona as a man of divinity shrouded in myth and supernatural traits, representing for them what it means to be a perfect individual, since the society deems the traits required to be an exceptional player as traits for a god-like man.

Juricic (2013) notes that Alejandro Veron founded the *Church of Maradona (Iglesia Maradoniana)* in 1998 in the Argentine city of Rosario. Members of the Church of Maradona believe Diego Maradona is the best player of all time, and they count the years since Maradona's birth in 1960. The church also has its own Ten Commandments. Stickings and Couzens (2020) note that at Maradona's death in 2020, he received a state funeral with his remains lying in-state at the official residence of the President of Argentina for the duration of the national mourning, while thousands flooded the streets of Buenos Aires to honour the footballer they worshipped as a demi-god. World media houses gave massive coverage to Maradona's death, with perhaps the most catchy one being the French sports magazine, *L'Equipe,* with a full page cover of Maradona and a rather heretical screamer of a headline, "God is dead!". Stickings and Couzens also note that a Spanish newspaper combined Maradona's number 10 shirt with the Spanish word for God—"D10S", and also included the number 10 in the Spanish word for goodbye—"AD10S", in honour of the dead footballer, a sort of "Good bye, God" psycho-religious contraption.

Similar to Maradona's deification is that of the late Brazilian super-star Pele, who died on December 29, 2022. Dubbed the "Eternal King of Soccer" by some football enthusiasts, Pele was the only player to have won three World Cups in history, for Brazil. His high level of influence was such that the Brazilian president declared a three-day national mourning period for the FIFA "Player of the Century" award winner. Countries, teams, players, corporations and individuals sent in their tributes along with the out-pouring of eulogies and condolence messages from across the globe. Among the myriads of tributes, Michel Platini's comments that "To play like Pele is to play like God," and Romario's "He's like a God to us," stand out. Following the state funeral, Pele was buried on the ninth floor of a thirty-two story skyscraper cemetery in Santos, Brazil, according to his wish—a befitting resting place for a "deity" in football, passing on as a great world figure and as one of the "immortal gods" in the world of football.

Kuiper (1999), from the perspective of Christianity, posits that the modern craze for leisure and entertainment is having its effect on the worship services of many churches. When church members are viewed as consumers who want to be entertained and seek entertainment outside religious activities of the church, it may be because God and all that He stands for in religious activities has been presented to the hedonistic modern society as a consumer-friendly God. Part of what puts football at par with religion is that much of what characterizes today's Christian worship is also similarly driven by the underlying crave for entertainment. People want to have a jolly good time in their church or else they will leave the church to find a better one with better music, a funnier and more motivational preacher, bigger stage and more brilliant lighting effects. Soccer provides much more than all the thrills that are sought after in entertainment. It also offers the role-models that both the fans and their children can look up to and strive to pattern their lives after as an undeclared replacement for their erstwhile religious activities.

Kuiper (1999) concludes that the Christian end-time warning prophecy that men would become lovers of pleasure more than God has come to be, and laments that the love of pleasure has developed into pleasure-madness where the rightness or wrongness of any activity is determined by whether it results in pleasure or pain. Thus as he puts it, for lovers of football, the well-attended churches are the stadiums. Their "gods" are the players, and their offerings to these "gods" enable the players to have salaries of millions of dollars per year. Life without sports would be inconceivable to them and would not be worthwhile if they could not fanatically attach themselves to some

team and cheer their hearts out for their soccer heroes and idols.

Religion and Soccer: The African Experience

In Africa which is a melting pot of traditional religion and other religions occasioned by colonialism, western missionary enterprise, and lately, globalization, football ranks high on the list of phenomena that have both wide acceptability and disruptive influences on society in modern times. In Africa, religion and football generate both cooperation and conflict depending on the context. Both share the unique ability of crossing boundaries and gluing people of different cultural and political groups together. In African culture, individualism is not a highly recognized value. Individuals have to take on family cum group and ethnic identity to belong to the larger society. Similarly, football is about a balance between teamwork and individual talent and creativity. Religion has a striking semblance to teamwork in sports in that it encourages serving fellow human beings with a sense of individual accountability to God the creator. In this light, Girma (2019) opines that religious leaders and ordinary believers in Africa do not need to feel threatened by the overriding popularity and influence of football on the people in their religion and society. Rather, Africans need to re-imagine success in sports not through the agency of witchcraft (see below) which promotes short-cut and trickery, but with the values of hard work, discipline, team spirit, and endurance that sports ethics emphasize and offer, and which accord with the moral virtues that are deeply engrained in the African worldview and culture. The World Cup and other major soccer tournaments attract a lot of attention and interest among the young and old in Africa. Girma refers to the effects of the 2018 World Cup in Russia on Africans with regard to their religion, seeing the devotion, excitement and euphoria that accompany such a fiesta as a challenge to the continent's religion. He states that religion and sports are supposed to serve different purposes. Religion is meant to provide people with spiritual well-being, while sports serve aesthetic needs and entertainment. Nevertheless, they share a common audience and cultural values such as the values of fairness, discipline and commitment, which can be used to address African challenges.

In spite of the similarities in shared values, many in the religious community view football in Africa with contempt and suspicion. This is because of the concern that football in Africa has a tendency to incorporate and apply witchcraft. Witchcraft is viewed as a negative aspect of religion in the continent and elsewhere, but is used to gain success in football matches. It is widely believed that both individual players and whole teams often use supernatural powers known as "juju" to imbue players with spiritual powers for their games. It is also used for protection from the assumed spiritual powers of their rival teams, to influence the officials and possibly get a good result—victory over the opposing teams. While witchcraft and soccer fandom may seem like unrelated topics, they share commonalities in terms of rituals, superstitions, collective energy, and emotional investment. By exploring these parallels, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of soccer fandom. Soccer fans often engage in pre-match rituals, such as wearing lucky jerseys, performing specific chants, or following traditional pre-game routines. These rituals can be seen as a form of sympathetic magic, where fans believe their actions can influence the outcome of the game. Fans may have superstitions about certain players, coaches, or teams, believing they bring good or bad luck. These superstitions can be compared to the concept of "hexing" or "cursing" in witchcraft, where individuals believe they can influence events through magical means. Soccer fandom often involves a strong sense of collective identity, where fans share a common purpose and passion. This collective energy can be compared to the concept of "group consciousness" in witchcraft, where individuals come together to amplify their magical intentions. Soccer stadiums can be seen as sacred spaces, where fans gather to participate in rituals and ceremonies. This concept is reminiscent of the idea of "sacred circles" in witchcraft, where individuals create a designated space for magical workings. Soccer fandom can be an intense emotional experience, with fans investing their hopes, fears, and passions into the game. This emotional release can be compared to the concept of "catharsis" in witchcraft, where individuals release pent-up emotions to achieve a state of balance and renewal. Fans often strongly identify with their team, which can lead to feelings of pride, joy, or disappointment. This identification can be seen as a form of magical identification, where individuals merge their energy with that of the team, influencing the outcome of the game. So, the next time you're cheering for your favorite team, remember that you're participating in a form of collective magic, where

your energy and emotions can influence the outcome of the game.

With the growing trend to incorporate magic in football, it is therefore not surprising that some religious leaders have issues with football in terms of the spiritual and other-worldly intervention that is sought to replace or compliment the hard work and discipline needed for soccer victory cum glory. This "spiritual" dimension of soccer in Africa, coupled with its demands for allegiance, prodigious expense of time, and excessive emotional devotion from followers, have made some religious leaders see football as a threat. With the foregoing, and the idolization of football stars, it is not surprising that some religious leaders and their devoted faithful resent the rising popularity and impact of soccer on the continent. This misgiving is also heightened by the over-hyping and disproportionate use of religious metaphors by sports commentators and analysts to advertise, propagate and elevate football in the media. It is worsened by the elevation of prominent footballers to enviable heights, like calling Lionel Messi "the Messiah", and dubbing Cristiano Ronaldo a "god".

However, in spite of the concerns of religion, soccer has become an important aspect of people's lives in Africa and the rest of the developing world. Girma (2019) states that beyond entertaining people, soccer offers a means of relaxing emotional tensions and creates the much needed, albeit temporary, distraction from the realities of the numerous problems ordinary people encounter on a daily basis—aptly granting credibility to Karl Marx's "opiate of the masses" theory. Soccer followership is also a time-tested means of whipping up an over-ridding sense of national pride and undying patriotism, which politicians can and do harness to great advantage. The ever-rising influence of football in Africa is also due to the fact that it is one of the ways to solve the nagging unemployment problems and improve the finances of individual players, especially those who are fortunate enough to play as professionals in the established leagues of the western world. In fact, football has become one of the few means of producing African millionaires, such as George Weah, Roger Miller, Jay Jay Okocha, Didier Drogba, Mohammed Salah, Victor Osimhen, and so on, who inspire the African youth to pursue success and greatness. These and many other soccer super-stars help to secure Africa's quota of worship-able "gods" in the new world religion of football. Soccer as a big-time, money-spinning venture clearly produces a lot of inspiring role-models for young people in the developing economies of Africa just as saints and martyrs in religion inspire zeal, devotion and holiness.

Girma (2019) also rightly notes that in many African countries football provides a safe environment for some of the most lively and hot discussions among its teeming enthusiasts, and is one of the few social spaces in which people practice freedom of speech without fear of retribution. Fans can freely criticize and even curse coaches and players alike whom they deem to be under-performing. Every fan can choose to become a self-made analyst, wading into coaching and playing patterns, recommending coaches to be sacked and players to be sold, predicting the outcome of matches, and analyzing, rightly or wrongly, the performance of individual players and the officiating of the matches without worrying about getting harassed or being arrested for their views. All this is very unlike discussions in the political sphere and in other spheres in the developing African continent, which is fraught with totalitarian regimes that stifle freedom of speech and expression.

The Impact of Football in Nigeria

Football is a culture that has been deeply rooted in the Nigerian culture for many years, pre-dating independence from Great Britain. According to Wiebe (2018), football was first introduced to Nigeria by the British at the start of the 20th century, with the first recorded football match in the country being held in 1904. By 1950, it had become the national game of the country and has ever continued to grow rapidly, joining the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) in 1960, the year of independence from Britain. Many Nigerians derive entertainment and a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from being part of its organization. Interest in football has continued to sky-rocket among all age-groups in Nigeria and the country can be rated among countries with the largest fan base in the African continent. The country has regional teams that contest in the National League, and the 'Super Eagles', the national team, regularly competes for international titles and has made its mark in global sports competitions as one of the best soccer teams in Africa. As the most popular sport in Nigeria, football gives a sense of national pride to the citizens and is a veritable source of making local, regional and international heroes.

In recent years, football's popularity has continued to skyrocket, making Nigeria one of the largest sports

betting markets in the world. Smith (2023) states that with the advances in communication technology, online gambling and betting services have become more accessible and affordable, as betting apps have been made available to millions of people worldwide. Thus, betting has made way for people to increasingly enjoy their football experience as well as combine their passion for soccer with pursuit of financial gain through the opportunities afforded by soccer betting. Peredictz.ng identifies 29 betting sites for sports addicts in Nigeria. With gamblers or "betters" in Nigeria having so many betting companies to choose from, the time and resources devoted to soccer and its affiliated acts subtract from devotion to religion and other concerns in the Nigerian society. The craving for sports betting among the youth in Nigeria, who may have the aim of getting quick wealth, is akin to the popular prosperity gospel and the "sowing and reaping" teaching that is the order of the day especially in the Christian religion in Nigeria.

Football detracts from religious activities on the week-ends, such as the Friday prayers of Muslims and the Sunday worship services of Christians. Like these religious gatherings, football provides the rituals of week-end socialization and leisure in Nigeria for the teeming masses truly committed to the sport. If there is a clash of schedules between soccer matches and days of worship and other religious gatherings, those who are growing less devout in their religious obligations choose to stay home on Sundays to watch the match of the day. Dafe (2017) postulates that football offers its adherents the annual calendar of fast and feast to shape their lives just like the church year used to do. Football has inherited all the tribalism of religion, giving followers something to belong to, and bringing nations and communities together and uniting them against the enemy, whether in physical violence or just chant.

Commenting on the ritual effects of football in Nigeria, Chukwuneke (2024) opines that after a major victory/trophy, a football team can transcend into the realm of divinity to become a way to experience oneness of spirit and unity of faith in a country with a lot of diversity. Both players and fans can experience days of fasting and prayers, inviting prophets, imams, and sometimes, traditional priests to invoke the god of soccer in their favour. Chukwuneke rightly asserts that football has always challenged the devotion and inclination of the adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria—Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion—stating that a greater percentage of young people in the country would rather watch a Premier League or UEFA Championship League game on cable television than go to a religious meeting. Such young people spend more time watching and reading football materials than their Bible or Koran, and have more in-depth knowledge of football than their religious scripture.

Most followers of soccer in Nigeria are too sophisticated for the quality that the Nigerian domestic league has to offer, and would rather follow top leagues in Europe in their homes or from the viewing centres scattered across the country, like the churches and mosques. These viewing centres serve the soccer adherents like the religious places of worship serve their congregations during the mid-week and the week-end. Chukwuneke concludes that the churches and mosques have been trying to get the people they are losing to soccer back from what they call "idol worship" by forming football outreaches or evangelism to engage the youth. Other religious leaders have out-rightly declared the new football "religion" as the devil's tool to lure people away from God.

It has been the tradition in most parts of eastern Nigeria for soccer fiestas to be part of the Christian celebration of Christmas, among other social gatherings that are organized during the Christmas /New Year celebrations. Nnadi (2015) notes that when many Igbo people in the diaspora return to their kith and kin at the end of each year to celebrate Christmas and subsequently welcome the in-coming year, inter-community and inter-branch soccer fiestas have, since the late 1970s, formed a salient part of the festivities. Football teams from different urban areas (branches) in which the sons and daughters of a given community live, like Lagos, Abuja, etc. compete for laurels in the selected community school fields with throngs of fans cheering their teams. Most of the players make it a point of duty to return in good time to practice their team strategy in order to perform well. Many people who purposefully come home to celebrate a religious festival, Christmas, and to subsequently welcome a new year and pray for its divine blessings, hardly enter the churches even for the main Christmas Day service on December 25. As most school fields are located near churches (due to the close connection between the churches and schools from the church missionary enterprise in eastern Nigeria), one can easily see groups of football players on such fields preparing for the community football competitions even while the faithful are holding their Christmas services.

One of the researchers who is a priest of the Anglican Church has had the daunting task of having to plead and parley with a group of players and their fans whose spontaneous and noisy celebration of mere practice goals actually disturbed his church's Christmas morning service. Apparently the soccer fiestas and other social aspects of the celebrations are more important for a majority of people than religious obligations during such festive mass-returns. The fact that football competitions are more heavily attended than church services, evangelism crusades, and other religious gatherings lends credence to the fact that soccer has become a parallel religion to people in eastern Nigeria where the vast majority are known to be Christians, at least at the nominal level.

The other researcher recalls a similar experience during the 2002 soccer World Cup hosted by Japan and Korea. Because of the difference in international time zones, Nigeria's group stage match with Argentina scheduled on June 2, 2002 happened on a Sunday morning. Across Nigeria, both in the rural and urban areas, there were many empty pews during that morning's service because of people's preference to watch the game live on television. Some smart pastors who had anticipated such an outcome, and perhaps who love football too, adjusted their time of service to allow soccer-loving members of their congregations to watch the encounter (which the Super Eagles eventually lost by a lone goal). Others, as reported in some Nigerian tabloids, brought television sets into their churches to concurrently "pray" for the Super Eagles while watching the match, after which they continued with their worship sessions. One can readily see how the over-riding compulsion to watch a live soccer "ritual" being conducted half a world away disrupted the traditionally established weekly rituals of the Christian service in another part of the globe. This is a strong pointer to the fact that Christianity has been compelled to either make some compromise with football, or risk its churches having empty pews, or out-rightly lose its adherents to the soccer religion.

It is also well known that against a background of the erratic power supply in the country, many people in Nigeria buy petrol or diesel to power their generators and stay awake late into the nights to watch live football matches during major soccer tournaments hosted in far-away time zones. Whereas such soccer devotees are keen on spending time and other resources to enjoy football and follow their team's progress, many among them are obviously not either ready or willing to participate in and spend a similar quantity and quality of time in night prayer vigils and other related religious activities to which they may be obligated in their different religions.

One of the natural reactions of religious institutions, especially Christian ones, to the waves of people whose attention has been largely diverted from religious activities to football has been to incorporate aspects of football activities in the extra-liturgical packages they offer to their members. This includes the normal football matches that involve older people that are organized to mark church anniversaries and spice up celebrations within the churches. In Nigeria, as in other countries across the world, churches are founding football teams for their members in a sort of "if you can't beat them, join them" approach to accommodating the unconquerable interest of their members in soccer. Major churches in Nigeria organize football leagues and tournaments for youth groups in their catchment areas to placate their interest in soccer and still keep them as active church members. In this regard, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church was the first church to establish a soccer team (MFM FC) that made its way into the competitive Nigerian Professional League in 2015, with other churches following suit. Subsequently, the COD United FC, another Nigerian professional football club based in Lagos was established by the COD Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Wikipedia states that the COD United FC runs seven football teams for various age-groups, ranging from Under-10 to Under-21 teams, including a female club known as the COD United Amazons FC.

With this growing trend, Eludini (2014) notes that what he calls "the first Church World Cup" soccer tournament was organized for church-based teams from Colombia, Egypt, Uzbekistan, India, Brazil, Ghana, Nigeria and Portugal. The competition was held in India in honour of Francis Xavier, the late Christian missionary, and was won by Nigeria's Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Team (MFM FC) in December 2014, after thrashing the United Church of Colombia team 7 – 0 in the final match to lift the trophy.

Football Evangelism in Nigeria

A good number of discerning church leaders in Nigeria are taking the interest of the youth in football into consideration and factoring this into their schedules accordingly. Some have viewing centres on church premises to attract soccer lovers to their

churches, while others especially in the urban areas, encourage supporters of various clubs (fan clubs) to identify as groups in the churches and come into the church service with their team flags, T-shirts/jerseys and other club paraphernalia for their own group harvests during the church harvest season. It is like learning to compulsorily adjust and accommodate a new and influential parallel religion, the neglect of which would be to the detriment of the growth of the existing one.

On this premise, a relatively new term "football cum soccer evangelism" has come into usage in the Nigerian churches, which is the practice of using football games as one of the platforms to share the gospel and promote Christian values. This involves using the game of football to reach out to and attract the younger age-group into the churches through inter-parish and inter-group soccer tournaments. Such football evangelism is fully funded by the churches, and intends to meaningfully engage the youth in their favourite pastime while still retaining their interest and participation in church activities. This is a well-calculated attempt to push back on the vast territorial gains being made by the unseen "god of soccer" on the religious cum social space of our modern society, with the aim of checkmating the seemingly irrepressible rampages and quest for conquest of more territory by football.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the similarities between football and religion as they obtain in the modern world, stating its evolving influence as a new religion in society. The paper has looked into how soccer has developed into a sport of mass-engagement and entertainment as well as a catalyst for patriotism, national identity, and pride. Through the analysis presented, we have seen how strong and unrelenting the influence of football has become across the globe, and especially in Nigeria, the immediate focus of study. We have also noted the causes of this influence on the population of both the young and old people in the developed and the developing countries of the world. The acceptance of football as the so-called "king of sports" is taking its toll on the time and resources formerly devoted to religious engagements, with the commitment it affords surpassing that of religious devotion and fervor. This overwhelming influence has pushed a good number of Christian leaders in Nigeria and elsewhere to re-strategize and accommodate soccer or risk a steady and uncontrollable decline of their member's interest in Christian religious engagements in favour of football. Further research is needed to track, assess and understand the continuing growth and influence of football and its related activities across the world, or in particular regions of our continents. This is with the aim of further harnessing its potential for religious, social, political and economic development.

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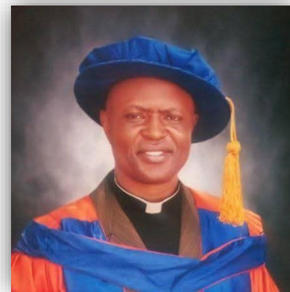

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NEWS & OPINIONS

"My God! You are a Mussulman Man Like Me!"

Robert L. Canfield

This is about a conversation between me, an anthropologist, and a peasant farmer who lived in a relatively isolated village in central Afghanistan. In this conversation some of the presuppositions of the farmer about foreigners like me were overturned by some of the things he learned about me, my faith, and the world that I come from. In the end he spontaneously pronounced me a moral person like himself. I conclude with a discussion of how our interpersonal conversations can lead to deeper personal relationships.

It is not uncommon for people in one religious tradition to suppose that folks in other religious traditions are less pious, less moral than themselves, maybe even condemned to hell as unbelievers (Accad and Andrews 2020). This paper is about the mutual surprise of two strangers to discover that, despite their contrary religious backgrounds, they could recognize in the other a common ground of humanity.

The conversation was between me and a peasant farmer named Khodāhdād,[1] whom I met in 1967 in an isolated valley high in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan. I had gone to Afghanistan to study the diverse customs of the people of the country and like others doing field work I brought to the project my own moral presumptions—presumptions that would be tested, as often happens to us when we come to know people unlike ourselves. As my conversation with Khodāhdād entailed a confrontation of different religious presumptions it seems imperative that I reveal some details of the moral perspective that I brought to that moment.[2]

My Background

I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and as a high school student I became involved in a Christian movement known as Young Life. When I went to university I became active in a similar organization, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.[3] Through the people I came to know and admire in those organizations I made a serious personal commitment to follow Christ as I best knew how. As it happened, however, throughout my university experience I was struggling with a problem I had with God, for He was not answering my prayers about an issue that was deeply painful to me. Eventually, I decided to seek a more specific understanding of the faith that I had espoused. While I knew a number of proof-texts in the Bible, I knew little about the Bible as a whole, so I set out to read it in hopes I could better understand what I had gotten into. That decision would be the most significant educational experience of my university experience. By the time I had graduated I had read thoughtfully through the whole Bible almost twice, and I came away from the experience with a different perspective of myself, my sense of what God was like, and what he was doing in human affairs. Honestly, I don't think the problem that had spurred my reading project had been resolved. But now it seemed less compelling, and it was by then absorbed within the grander, more comprehensive view I now had of what the Bible was all about. Of course, there would be much more to learn, and I continued to read regularly through the

[1] The name is fictitious.

[2] I am deeply indebted to the Ford Foundation for supporting two years of field research in Afghanistan.

[3] Through those years I had never heard of someone who would later be associated with Tulsa, Oral Roberts.

Bible at my own pace.[4] It would be some years before I worked out my understanding of how God works among peoples in other societies. The effect was to generate in me an inner sense of gratitude and I wanted to give myself to a social activity that would seem an appropriate response.

Immediately after graduation I found an opportunity to teach English in Afghanistan. I was happy to sign a contract at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington when Dr. Tabibi, the Afghan ambassador, asked me not to proselytize my faith in his Muslim country. I agreed. While I was animated to go to Afghanistan because of my faith I did not suppose that what I would be doing would be proselytizing. Anyway, I didn't know how to proselytize in my own language, much less in one I didn't know.

In Kabul I taught English to Afghan students in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in an old building known as Habibia College, a school instituted in 1903 by King Habibullah Khan. It was a great experience for a 22-year-old that had scarcely ever been outside of Oklahoma. I spent much of my free time trying to learn the local language, Kabuli Persian, now called Dari. I got a tutor and also I sat outside trying to talk to the children playing in my street. It was great fun. But after two years my draft board disallowed me from staying. So I returned to the States where I ended up going to graduate school.

I was able to get back into Afghanistan in 1957 after doing my military service, this time with my new bride, and in the next few years Rita and I produced three children in Kabul. That was our home. This time I was again teaching English as a second language but employed by Teachers College Columbia University, which, as part of the United State Foreign Aid Program, had contracted to work with the Afghan government to develop its education program. Again, a supervisor, with some embarrassment, asked me to refrain from proselytizing (admitting that what he was doing was "uneducational."). My job was to teach English in the higher grades; I also worked in the production of English Language textbooks to be used throughout the country. We stayed in Kabul until late in 1964 when I was admitted into the doctoral program in anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Thus, when I returned to Afghanistan in 1966 to undertake anthropological field work I had studied anthropology and Middle Eastern culture at the University of Michigan and the London University School of Oriental Studies and I still held to my Christian faith. Importantly, I had more facility in speaking Dari. It was exciting to be on the ground and able to undertake serious research among the peoples I had come to enjoy and admire.

The Bamyan Valley

The location for my field project was the Bamyan Valley, a place famous for the giant Buddhas built by a Buddhist community that had flourished between the second and eighth centuries CE. Throughout history this valley had been a major depot of the Central Asian caravan traffic between India and China. The opportunity to do research among the citizens of this famous valley had come to me through the invitation of someone I met in Kabul. He was a local leader in a village in eastern Bamyan near the Shibar Pass. Shibar was the entre into Bamyan for travelers coming from Kabul. The trip entailed passing through Koh Daman to the Ghorband valley which eventually came to the base of the pass. Here the road began to rise abruptly as much as 2000 feet through a series of switchbacks to reach the summit of the pass, which is 9800 feet above sea level. From there the road descends into the Bamyan valley, a narrow east-west plain about 45 miles long, before it begins to rise into the highlands of Qarganatu. At the center of the valley where the largest Buddha looms over a small market town the plain is little more than a mile wide. Above this famous valley ascends the mountains of the Hindu Kush, at its highest point 13,100 feet above sea level.

The eastern boundary of this valley is an escarpment created by the subduction of the South Asian tectonic plate under the Eurasian tectonic plate at this point. This is Shibar and from it water flows three different directions. From its eastern slopes moisture descends into the Ghorband valley to form a river that joins the Kabul River which in turn flows into the Indus which debouches into the Indian Ocean. Some waters flow westward into Bamyan and at a low point meet the waters flowing out of the western hills and from this juncture point they veer northward and they surge through the narrow Shikari Gorge, to enter the catchment area of the Oxus River, which in earlier times drained into the Aural Sea, but since Soviet times

[4] See my 2016 chapters, 7 and 8, which discuss what the Bible says about people outside of the community of believers. My 2024 examines how the human moral imagination copes with crisis, using a terrible experience in Jewish history as an example.

have been diverted onto the cotton farms of Uzbekistan, leaving the Sea slowly to become a desert. Also, on the northwestern slopes of the Shibar escarpment water drains southward to form the Helmand River which, passing through the Registan Desert, dies in the Dasht-e Margo ("Desert of Death") salt marshes bordering Iran.

The tribal peoples occupying the lands of the Hindu Kush are Hazaras, although at the market town below the largest Buddha some people call themselves Tajiks. Most Hazaras identify themselves as Imāmi Shia, (ʾIthnā ʿAšaris, "Twelvers") although in Shibar a sizeable community of Ismailis live among them. The East Asian features of these people suggest that the Hazaras originated somewhere in the Far East, possibly Mongolia.[5]

In my first year of my field-work in Bamyan I made bi-weekly forays into Shibar visiting friends of my patron in several villages. During the second year I studied the market town at the center of Bamyan. The conversation I describe here took place in spring 1967 in a village of Shibar. I suppose that other than their leaders few folks from this area traveled much beyond the market town.

Of course, in my manner and accent I stood out as a foreigner, a *khārijī*. And by implication I probably was not a Muslim. That is, I was an unbeliever, an infidel, a *kāfir*. This is a Qur'anic term and it meant, as in Sura 26:19, or 16:55, or 30:33, someone who "conceals" something, such as the truth. The term was applied to the Meccans who opposed the prophet early on (Sura 1:2) and so it had the sense of an unbeliever, thus an "infidel." The Fiqh scholars trying to organize the obligations of believers used the term to mean someone who was condemned, bound for hell. That *kāfirs* are eternally damned is presumed by most folks in Afghanistan, according to several friends. And with that notion it has come to imply someone who has no scruples, is unclean and sexually promiscuous. A *kāfir*, I was told, will sleep with his mother and his sister. Jeffery Goldberg says of the students in the Daral Uloom madrasah that they believe Americans "will engage in sex with anything anywhere, all the time." Goldberg when visiting the seminary was asked "whether American men were allowed by law to keep boyfriends and girlfriends at the same time."[6]

In the Hazarajat the term *kāfir* connected with certain features of the environment, for the famous Buddha statues and the meditational caves carved into the limestone cliffs evoke a time when these valleys pulsed with a Buddhist civilization in which the people worshipped the giant idols that loom over the valley. And besides the Buddhas and the caves for meditation that that civilization left behind there were the ruins of their villages built high up in the tributary valleys of Bamyan. These ruins are known locally as *kāfir qalāhs*, "infidel forts." Three times during the two years I was in the highlands of Bamyan someone said to me, in effect, "Your ancestors, your people, built these forts." It was a mystifying statement to me at first, but eventually I came to realize that this was how I fitted into their world. I was a *kāfir*, an unbeliever like those who had built those towns, and so they supposed that it had been my people who built those *kāfir qalāhs.* They could not have been built by their ancestors, they reasoned, for their people are Muslims who eschew idolatry. To people of Shibar it made sense that my ancestors, *kāfirs* like me, had constructed the *kāfir qalās*.

My Interlocutor

Khodādād was a non-literate peasant farmer of these highlands, as this account will reveal, little informed about the world I came from. I suspect he had scarcely ever been out of Shibar. So I avoid calling him a "typical Afghan." Truly, I don't know how to identify such a type anyway, and I am sure that my urban, educated, multi-lingual Afghan friends in Kabul would have been embarrassed to have Khodāhdād held up as "typical Afghan" of any sort. They would say, as he would say himself, that he was kohband, "mountain bound," limited in his local experience to his home high in a Shibar valley. In fact, we were about three hours on foot to the main road and (in those days) about twelve-hours by car to Kabul.

So, it is worth emphasizing that such a conversation could not these days take place anywhere among the Afghanistan peoples. This is not the same world. No Afghan could be unaware of the foreign powers that have been involved in this country through four decades of war. The Communist/mujahedin war of 1978-1991 was started by the Soviet invasion, and the

[5] An excellent article on the Hazaras is in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazaras.

[6] Quoted in Edwards (2017, 137).

opposition was enabled by money and materiel from the United States and Pakistan, not to mention several other countries of the industrial world. The little remarked internecine war among the Hazaras (1982-1984), in which Hazaras fought bitterly against each other, was largely due to the meddling of Iran. The vicious battle for Kabul in 1992-1996 between several mujahedin organizations was funded by several foreign powers: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The Taliban struggle with the Northern Alliance (1996-2001) was supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia while their opponents were backed by Iran, India and Russia. And finally, the Americans' attempt to crush the Taliban (abandoned by the Pakistanis and Saudis) in 2001-2002 was animated by their furious desire to find Osama Bin Laden. Thus, no Afghan, even a farmer in Shibar, could be unaware of the wider world in the current millennium, which is not to say that the people have had reason to abandon their beliefs about foreign *kāfirs*.

The Conversation

This account of my conversation with Khodāhdād is based on notes taken down immediately after the conversation.

He squatted on the edge of a well-worn cotton rug that his uncle had graciously provided to shield my sleeping bag from the dirt floor for the few days I would be a visitor in his house.

"We hear a lot about your country nowadays. But that has only been for the last 15 years or so. Before then we never heard of your place. We heard about Iran and Germany and England—you know, where Peshawar is—and Russia . . . and China, but not about America. It must be far away. How long did it take you to get here? A week! Did you come by boat or by bus? By airplane! And it took you a week?" He sighed with amazement.

"Well," I said, "we weren't traveling all that time. We stopped along the way for two or three days in a couple of places."

"Ho! So far!" The further clarification was no help.

He ingressed a long draft of air through his teeth, the way a peasant farmer does when he's about to say something serious. "They tell me there is a big river over there somewhere, you know, that you have to cross before you come here."

"A big river?"

"That's what I heard—is there a big river over there?"

"You mean a big, wide stretch of water, a whole lot of water?" I couldn't remember the Afghan Farsi word for "ocean."

He grunted his affirmation.

"Well, it's a very lot of water, but it isn't a river because it isn't moving anywhere. I mean, it doesn't go anywhere, like the water does in a river."

"What does it do?"

"I guess it just sits there. Well . . . It's just there." I was stumped by my limitations in the language.

He seemed to ponder, blankly, to himself.

"Well, it isn't always necessarily quiet," I said. "The wind can blow and make it move around a lot" (I didn't know the word for "waves" either).

Suddenly I remembered the word for ocean: "It's a bahr," I said. It didn't help him; he lived in the mountains of a land-locked country that had scarce reason to deal with oceans, and it seemed to have no real significance to him. "River" (daryā) seemed to do just fine for him.

"So your country is covered with water," he said thoughtfully.

"No, no," I cut in impatiently, "there's water all around it, but of course it isn't on top of the country."

"Oh." He adjusted his crossed legs and changed the subject. "Do you have mountains like these?" I affirmed it was so.

"I hear you water your crops with airplanes."

"No, no," again I interrupted, "We only spread medicine over the crops with planes; we don't water crops that way."

"So you just irrigate your fields like we do."

"Well, yes, sometimes, but most of our farming is dryland."

"Dryland? All that wheat that comes to our country is from dryland?" He adjusted his feet again and leaned back on the cushion. "People say you have a machine that cuts the wheat for you. . . . It also threshes the wheat at the same time? . . . So then all you have to do is throw it in the air to separate the chaff. The machine does that too? Ho! Such a machine!"

"How much could this machine harvest in one day? Our whole valley in one day? I wish our government would give us one. Why doesn't your government give us one?"

I evaded the question by explaining that in my country the government doesn't give the machine to people; the farmers buy it themselves. "How much do they cost?"

"I'm not a farmer, so I suppose it would cost, maybe, $4,000 dollars or more." (In 1969 dollars.)

"How much is that in rupas?"

"Maybe, about 32,000 rupas."

"So much money! I suppose that's even more than your women cost!"

"Oh, they don't cost anything. I mean we don't have to pay anything to the father for the girl."

He sat up, gaping. "They are free?"

"Yes, we don't even go to the parents. We talk directly to the girl and make the agreement face to face with her."

He collapsed back on his cushion. The look on his face seemed to indicate profound amazement.

"You mean you just talk to her and . . . that's all?" He was speaking softly. "You just decide to take the girl and you just do it?"

"Uh- huh."

"And then you are just man and wife? I mean she just goes home with you?"

"Well, no. Of course, we have to get married before we do that." (Again, this was 1967, and this was Afghanistan. I didn't mention "the new morality.")

"Get married. So you have to get married over there too? Well!" He sat up with renewed interest, adjusted his brightly embroidered skullcap, and peered wide-eyed into my face. "You have to tell other people, right?"

"Yes, we call our mullah and he marries the boy and girl."

"You have a mullah? And he marries you! What do you know! You have a mullah! What does he do? Does he say something?"

"Well, he prays and . . . "

"He prays?," he interrupted with a start. "Your mullahs pray?"

"Of course they do!" I was offended.

"What do you know. . . . Wallah [By God!], sir, I didn't know!" He clapped his hand on the calf of his leg. "A guy would never know. I mean . . . if I hadn't talked to you . . . . Well, do you pray? I mean, do *you* pray too, or is it just the mullah?"

"Yes, of course, we pray too."

"What do you do? Do you kneel and bow, do you do rakas [prostrations, bows] like we do?"

"No, we don't pray quite like you do."

"How often do you have to pray?"

"We don't have to pray any set number of times. We don't have rules like that."

"No rules?" He was not impressed.

I thought I had to explain. "What I mean is we believe that God has given us salvation as a gift so we don't have any rules except to love Him with all our heart and to love each other."

"You don't have to do anything." He was having trouble understanding. "Do you have a prophet? We believe in 124,000 prophets, have you heard that?"

"Yes." I wanted to move to safer ground. "We are free to consider what we believe and to believe what we like. I believe in Jesus."

"In Jesus! Well, so do we! Sir, if I hadn't talked to you I wouldn't have known. So you Americans believe in Jesus!"

"Oh no, not all Americans. We are free to believe in Jesus or not to, as we like."

"Believe as you like, huh?" He drew his feet up into a squat, swiped his face with the back of his hand. He wasn't impressed.

I tried to explain. "We think it is better for people to be free to believe as they want—I mean we don't think people are worshipping if they are forced to worship in a certain way."

"You don't have to do anything and you don't have to believe anything." Now he was really unimpressed.

I tried to clarify, "Well, if we follow Jesus we have to believe something, but we don't force other people to believe what we believe, because we don't call it true faith if it doesn't come from within."

"It has to come from within." He seemed to ponder the idea tolerantly. Then he exclaimed, "By God, Sir, you are a *musulmān* man!" The word "*musulmān*" means a Muslim, a person who submits to the will of God (Arabic */s..l..m/* "submit"), but here it had the sense of an upright man who believed in God and submitted to him.[7] "Sir," he said, "You are a *musulmān* man, like me."

"Yes," I said. "I am a *musulmān* man like you."

Our conversation was at that moment interrupted. Anyway, it seemed to reach an end point when Khodādād saw something in me that he could relate to. I was upright like him, he had decided, even if I was not a Muslim. He took me to be a *musulmān* man in the sense that like him I was a man of faith and good will. That was enough for him.

His discovery was, in a sense, my discovery too. I enjoyed coming to know him as a person of good will like myself. Coming from our different social backgrounds, and despite our different grounds of

[7] In Persian the phrase is *musulmān ādam* (مسلما آدم). For instance, one can say, and I have heard it several times, referring to a respected individual, "*ū besyar musulmān ādam ast*," meaning the individual is the epitome of a good Muslim, an upright person.

truth and reality, and the odd beliefs and practices he had heard about from me, he and I could accept each other as morally analogous to ourselves. We had a common ground of mutual empathy.

Ethnography aspires to understand the social lives of others. We perform our tasks, as best we can, seeking to be as empathetic as possible. For some of us, says the philosophical anthropologist Michael Jackson, ethnographic work can be a kind of controlled experiment on ourselves in hopes of "enlarging our understanding of what it means to be human" (2009, 232). It enables us to see ourselves in the other, "as one might be or might have been under other circumstances" (ibid., 233). The reward for our projects is an ability to perceive ourselves in the "other." It is a perception unlike what we normally call "science."[8] "Much as we try to name, contain, and control our interactions with the world around us," says Jackson, "the interplay between self and other has a life of its own"(ibid., 2). In that interplay relationship becomes fellowship, mutual enjoyment, in which we recognize each other's respective "moral person-hood." This is what David Pocock calls "the significance and . . . joy of human existence."[9] Whatever I was to Khodādād before we talked—*farangi?, kāfir*?—he now believed that I had a moral sensibility more or less like his own. I was, in his elegant Islamic vocabulary, a *musulmā̱n* man like him.

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[8] I take this to be what the Persian Sufi poet Jalal-al-din Muhammad Rumi, whom the Afghans know as Balkhi, refers to when he says in his *The Great Wagon*, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there."

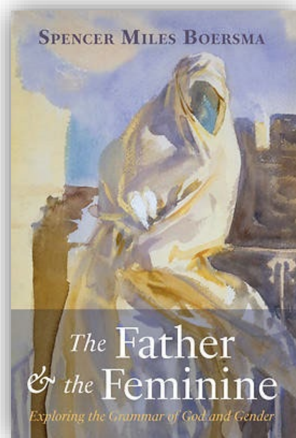
[9] "Moral personhood" is a term proposed by Wendy James (1988, 143); Pocock's phrasing is at (1986, 8), (cited by James 1988, 144.)

BOOK REVIEW

The Father and the Feminine: Exploring the Grammar of God and Gender

By Spencer Miles Boersma

Reviewed by Vincent E. Gil



Eugene, OR: Cascade Books
2024

Spencer Boersma's *The Father and the Feminine* is a seminal work resulting from Boersma's own journey from complementarian, hierarchical evangelicalism to a more nuanced postliberal understanding of the language we use to articulate God. (We only find out about this journey in the book's *Postscript*).

In that *Postscript*, Boersma quotes Baptist theologian James McClendon, who once stated *"All theology is biographical."* [1] Indeed, Boersma doesn't give away *his* biographical until the very end—and I suppose rightly so—so that his story doesn't disturb this erudite unpacking of the vocabularies we use to translate and refer to who God is. The journey concludes in fashioning a redemptive hermeneutic of God which engages not only the male, but also the female in God's image; and hopes that through communal discernment it moves us to embrace historical Biblical language and imagery *in veritate,* while encouraging freedom to use other vocabularies in contemplation, prayer, and worship. All of which exalts the Trinitarian God who acts as Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Friend—even 'Lady Wisdom'—all, he concludes, permissible grammars to the people of God. The journey changed Boersma, and he hopes reading his intriguing work will also inform and challenge the academic reader.

This work emphasizes that how we talk about God also affects *who we are* and *what we believe*.[2] It asks whether God can be referred to as female, as Mother, as a "she," or only as a "he." More to the point, what are the consequences which can stem from using specific nouns, pronouns, effusive or exacting, to depict God—both in the lived experience of men and women, but also as gendered creatures, made in God's image and as Christians, seeking to emulate God in thought and deed.

The book comes to press (2024) at a time when a resurgence of cultural, patriarchal nationalism and its melding with evangelicalism, evangelical identity, presages a continuity of masculine power and feminine submission. "If evangelicalism has [indeed] internalized patriarchy and nationalism, it serves as an

[1] Quoted by Boersma from McClendon (2012).

[2] Anthropological linguistics teaches that language is not only a mirror of culture, reflecting via its articulation the world view and ideologies of a culture; but also by its inhered vocabulary, reticularly influencing human thought and beliefs through the very words available. Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir's now well-worn hypothesis of *linguistic relativity* underscores the influence of a language on how its users see the world and interact with it. And this includes self-perceptions as well as overall belief systems, customs, and practices.

ironic and sad reminder that often there is a version of conservatism that is the mirror reflection of what it hates: an accommodation to worldly thinking" (5).[3]

In acknowledging this resurgence early in the work, Boersma is positioning the forthcoming review of arguments and propositions within the foil of sensitivity toward the fact there is continuation of an established system of dismissiveness toward women's voices; a "cultural system of language practices" which continues to be hostile to anyone questioning the authority of men. One can thus see how anyone questioning the necessity for a continuance of, or exclusive use of "Father language" in the biblical discourse of God and God's representation can be met with "wrathful force."

That all does not mean that a 'conversation' isn't *continuing* about God, gender, and language; or that it is still restricted to theological speculation. Boersma notes the factuality of this conversation moving from "speculative classrooms and seminaries" out and into the pews and parishioners who dare to question how God is referred to in the modern era.[4]

Charting a Course

A narrative theology of how God is articulated in the 20th and 21st centuries could explode to fractions that would take any reader to far-away corners, thus Boersma limits his review and commentaries primarily to the more academic arguments and questions of how God is or could be referred to. This is truly more than enough. He attempts to chart *and assess* the "diverse debate" on the gendered language used to define God, all the while understanding that the larger patterns of biblical language, Christian historicity, iconography, social, economic, racial intersectionalities necessarily play into the review. He previews his conclusion—and I quote it here so that the reader can keep it sternly in mind as they move through the twists and turns ensuing chapters take:

> . . . while male language for God should not necessarily be taken as offensive (and thus will continue in the church), it also cannot be taken as exclusive (which in many cases it is.) Feminist language for God exists in the Bible and church history, and, thus, is more than permitted. Indeed, such language can aid in finding deeper authenticity in the Christian way of life. (7-8)

Moreover, Boersma brings attention—early on as well—to the necessity for Christians to understand how language functions, and in particular how we render 'biblical language', since on many occasions what we 'say' it 'says' wouldn't actually be permitted or condoned were the full context of the language and its grammar be understood and honored.[5] The diversity of perspectives is continually being brought to light as Boersma moves us forward.

In his first chapter, "Revelation and Liberation," Boersma explores this rather visible duality which "splits the debate into two sides down the fault line of whether inclusive God-language is permitted." While emphasizing there is internal diversity present within both camps, Boersma drives home the main concerns: the reality of 'revelation', thus the authorial voice of

[3] All quotes from Boersma, *The Father and the Feminine,* are from the eBook edition unless otherwise noted.

[4] See the excellent examples in Dickinson and Edung (2013).

[5] And on this point I wish Boersma could have taken a minute to dive more persistently into a rudimentary, yet necessary paragraph or two on how language (any language) functions to inhere specific grammars; and focally, give voice to his commentary, following, that "the rules of Christian discourse" "must be apophatic, analogical, narrative-driven, configured by thematic centers that are Christological, pneumatic, and trinitarian." In his first chapter he discusses the referential and functional aspects of language as sites of meaning. He then jumps into the deeper clash in theology regarding the "rule of revelation" and what it does to literalism, missing guiding the reader through how an execution of revelation in orthodox form cements linguistic determinism in the masculine format. Nor is there an attempt here, early on, to come to grips with the historical, manifest world of the Bible as dogmatically patriarchal and often misogynistic. It's as if it's a taken-for-granted piece that needs no unpacking. Unpacking this all here vs. later, I feel, would have helped the reader who is perhaps *not as fluent* in historical theology to better contextualize historically and lexically those elements being explored. The two central lines which offer clarity are, "Revelation is historical and verbal and thus offers certain content"; and "The concern of this perspective is that any language about God must be done on the basis of the Bible, which records revelation, and, in turn, reveals."

Scripture;[6] and social implications which become its fallout. The worry of feminists (defined neutrally and not rabidly) that there is female alienation going on via the exclusion of female nouns and forms, and that these absences uphold a male God that is bound up with patriarchy, makes it seem God is closer to men and thus allows men to lord over women. "Therefore, that which oppresses women must be negated and supplanted," so goes the general feminist approach here.

In exploring this proposition, Boersma goes to great lengths to include dominant feminist Christian writers: Mary Daily, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Elizabeth Johnson, to name a few; each adding some diversity to the issues. The one unifying thread, if there is one to note, is that the consciousness of modern women to contest what assuredly feels discriminatory in how Scriptures as grammar interpreted reflect God—and by fallout, the human dilemma of gendered selves—warrants linguistic and grammatical revisions to how we read Scripture. Scriptural authority has incontrovertibly been misused in the favor of men.

On the other side are those who feel gendered male pronouns are self-referents by God; and while the male is not essential—since God is not a creature—male pronouns are thus preferable to a depersonalized "it." Male pronouns for God are thus "exclusively ordained for usage," since God self-refers as male, and Jesus refers to God as Father. These would argue that God would be unknowable were it not for *his* self-referent revelation; a manifestational revelation of the very reality God wishes to reveal, and which presages God's embodiment in a male Christ.

To end this important chapter, Boersma launches an appeal for a "deeper grammar," a "grammatical approach" that could integrate both the forms of interpretation of Scripture which retain revelation as well as accommodate more inclusive acknowl-edgments of God beyond male symbols and patriarchy. Certainly, an acknowledgement that 'Christian language' is itself a product and a grammatical guidebook subject to change over time:

> This poses significant questions for the relationship of men and women and how one speaks of God. Fatherhood meant something more in ancient times than today . . . How do these affect Christian speech in a way that holds to the core concerns of Scripture? (45) . . . . to think of the Christian faith as a language and Scripture as a book that offers the paradigms for this language, is to move between two strategies. (47)

And,

> . . . if the biblical cannon functions like a dictionary or glossary of the Christian way of speaking (or better yet, a grammatical guidebook, showing the patterns and concerns that govern Christian speech), then a Christian speaker may employ both [male and female pronouns] meaningfully and faithfully in different ways. The rules and context of usage would be central, however. (44)

We are left with understanding that this Christian grammar has the distinct possibility of allowing multiple lexical schemas, and "one set of rules [which] can actually result in more than one way of saying things." Scriptures do indeed have more than one pathway for referring to God.

In Chapter 2 Boersma takes us through the gauntlets of language's incapacity to express God (the *ineffability* and *incomprehensibility* quotients), God being too great or abstract to be verbally communicated in adequacy. Nevertheless, and falling back on "realistic revelation," this ineffability position often continues male-centric references because God refers to God in male terms. He quotes the Southern Baptist Convention's resolution of 1992 as proof text of this position: "God is beyond human gender . . . [but] has uniquely and explicitly revealed Himself to us as Father." (25)

Countering are both feminists and non who argue back that any literal forms of language about God can be/come idolatrous (he references among others, McFague's comments in *Metaphorical Theology* [1982]). Discussing positive and negative theologies, Boersma goes on to amplify the review by deliberating the possibility that in an apophatic reading negating male imagery there is also the negation of idolatry to a male God. Thus, much of the feminist critique of

[6] More on this authorial voice later, but it seems to me that "revelation" is yet another taken-for-granted term not explored etymologically till later. Here, it warrants elemental clarification; enough for readers who may again not be so theologically learned to understand its *propositional* and *manifestational* aspects. A clarifying footnote would have helped at this point.

patriarchal discourses which point to exclusive male symbology for God can open the way for God being symbolically shaped by women's realities as well.

Above all, Boersma is quick to remind the reader that throughout Scripture, God is described in terms that resist reduction to language, concepts or images—and he cites copious texts from both Testaments to affirm this (25). To cement the ineffability quotient, Boersma moves us through the writings of numerous church fathers and mystics, many calling for either a plurality of names for God, or falling back on God's "mystery," not dissolving it. The "I Am Who I Am" reverberates here.

On the prickly point of idolatry, Boersma asks whether the reduction of God to the creaturely by using gendered pronouns, especially and only male ones, leads one to idolize males and by extension, patriarchy (73). He of necessity then addresses the nature of idolatry, and God's own commandments to Israel to refuse any possibility of rendering God in an image. (To note, "image" here extends beyond the creaturely to anything created or *made idolatrous*; and that includes the Colossian warnings by Paul that anything which takes the place of God, supplants or robs God, limits God, puts self above God, is idolatry.)

To correct idolatry of the sort presumed, Boersma proposes "prophetic" and "contemplative" paths—*prophetic,* in calling out injustices and arrogance that have stemmed from the misuse and misunderstanding of God via male symbology. (He states, "Theology can and must look to those willing to call out injustice and lampoon images that have become morally lax" [78].) *Contemplative*—as well, personal and institutional contemplation, reflection on and revision of the symbols we use, engaging a consciousness of their purposes, widening the symbology to include the feminine and the neutral, and always, not reducing God to a "thing" (78–80).

Engaging Chapter 3 at this juncture is to open wide to learning how language functions through its *analogical* and *narrative* capacities. Here, Boersma does excellently well in capturing the patterns of language central to the arguments already under way. Thus, it would have been my wish to have explanations presented earlier in the work rather than at this juncture, given that an understanding of the way language works, its componential organization and structure, and in particular its analogical and narrational formats as illustrated here are somewhat assumed to be known when the earlier conversation and reviews are taking place.

That said, Boersma walks us through significant numbers of biblical metaphors and analogies for God that illustrate God as male, female, motherly, feminine in connotation, masculine in connotation, Almighty (*El Shaddai),* etc., much of these arising from Israel's own experiences with God. Particularly in evidence is God's love, providing above all else an understanding of God as goodness and perfection. That there are "dual gender references" throughout this review of Scripture is very much again underscored (110ff). Turning attention to such as Aquinas, Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria, Boersma goes to great lengths to help ensure that analogical and metaphorical language engaged by these neither replaces nor alters the fact that Scripture offers the "conditions and contexts of meaning by which one can refer to God" (131).

The main problematic remains, however, that there are conventions humans generate (thus the church!) which distort the fact both men and women are made in the image of God—yet God is greater than human images and conventions. Ultimately, the biblical narrative forms the canon by which Christian thinking is "regulated." Boersma acknowledges that within the narrative, there are included traditions—cultural at the core—that "have significant implications for how humans construe themselves as gendered creatures" (130).

With this acknowledgement he sets the reader up to ponder how typically male and female bodies (a "strategic essentialism," per Serene Jones [2000, 47-48]) can be other than gender binaries. (To not take away from the main scope of the chapter explored here, see the sidebar footnote below to get my thoughts on this last sentence.[7]) Boersma concludes that any reconceptualization of gender ought to be the result of

[7] *Sidebar:* Boersma states "all humans are tasked with searching for their authentic selves, not merely seeking to discover a static self within" (134ff). I'm delighted to also read and agree that this search for authentic identity, inclusive of sex (body) and gender (its performance and internalization) for Boersma doesn't do away with a "critical realism" of the body, nor its influences on our psyche's body-self understandings (*vide* Gil [2022]). Boersma understands that there are "distorting forces," in culture and society, inclusive of some Christian theology, which entangle one's search for this authenticity. Today, some follow the current movement of self-identification and self-representation regardless of biological or other markers as their sociopolitical and personal right; while others struggle from early childhood with gender: body-mind incongruence, or *gender dysphoria,* a genuine and diagnosable

one moving into congruence with God's actions of redemption. "The self, made in God's image, is only completed as it looks to Christ, the true image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) . . ." (148).

Chapters 4 and 5 are overviewed here in tandem for a reason: Boersma now enters into detailed discussions of three other lexical and symbolic subjects, a veritable 'trinity' of its own in discussing Christ (*vide* Christology), the Cross, and the Holy Spirit.

The intent is to cement both the historicity of Jesus, his sacrifice (via the cross), and engage views of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit, discussing at length its representations and extrapolating from it. Boersma strives to help the reader unbind patriarchy from the Trinity, as well as show how the feminine in all Trinitarian Persons—as in the church's iconic representations of the Trinitarian God—contribute to an understanding of the essence of God as love.

The task is enormous, a deep dive into the variegated theologies (feminist included), historical treatises and intertestamental works that abound in Christology; understandings of the cross; and of the Holy Spirit. These topically include the dynamics of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection; the symbology of the cross as witness to the Sacrificial Lamb, as well an "apocalyptic disclosure of God's kingdom and the coming new age" (148); and in the nature and actions of the Holy Spirit, which has been appropriated as Lady Wisdom in both feminist and non-feminist theologies.

Several captures from this gargantuan effort:

- Jesus, as portrayed by the Gospels was a historical person, and insofar as we speak historically about this person, Jesus is male. Jesus' maleness, however, is not exclusive since Jesus' incarnation is into *flesh*, which covers all of humanity and shows God's love for all.

- Boersma notes the problematic of appropriations of Jesus to represent particular gendered, racial or ethnic groups. Such appropriations should be interpreted not as an affront to any historical truths about Jesus, but rather, used for the purposes of communicating solidarity: the truth of God Immanuel (God *with* [all of] *us*). Speaking of appropriations, Boersma spends considerable time discussing and reflecting on *Christa*, a 1975 sculptural art piece representing a woman crucified, and the ensuing outcry. On this he concludes,

  > As it has been argued, an artistic depiction of a female Christ on the cross need not be at loggerheads with the historical description of Jesus . . . Rather it can be used to reiterate important theological truths implicit in the classic Christian doctrines of incarnation and atonement that the church has neglected. By picturing women's suffering as Christ's suffering, those who contemplate this image, men and women, are reminded that God is with all people, not just male flesh.[8] (134, paperback edition)

- The cross, variously intoned and represented, nevertheless consistently engages the supreme

issue. In both cases the family of God must enable the type of kinship and care, acceptance of the person which allows each to work out their salvation with not only fear and trembling, but also with the understanding that God loves dignity and extends it to all of God's creation. To that end, both Boersma and I agree that either of these seekers ought to find in the church safe spaces to work out the meaning of their bodies, their identities, without dehumanization. For more on gender and the "gender moment" see Gil (2021).

[8] This view may carry substance in cultures where there has been an historical and significant movement toward feminist sensitivities, cultures where also the political has opened up to inclusiveness and a more civil recognition of not only women, but those oppressed in sundry ways. (Is there such a place?) It is my belief that the Christian church has always lagged behind cultural movements in the direction of sex/gender equality; indeed, in many parts of the world it is still way behind. The comment does not move me to believe other than Boersma's positive comments on *Christa's* imagery will fall on blind eyes in most Western Christian and Orthodox traditions. An argument for the incorporation of woman—if not *embodied* in Christ, certainly equally *comprehended* by the male Christ—could come from a discussion of Jesus' healing the woman with an issue of blood, Jesus sensing a specific healing power emanating from him *to cure a womb* (Lk 8:43–48). I have argued such in an article titled "Was Jesus Sexual?" (2022) at http://drvincegil.com/downloads.

sacrifice and also reads as hope for those in some form of 'crucifixion'. It ultimately points to the resurrection—as final symbol of atonement the cross becomes "the culmination of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God . . ." (148).

- When the Spirit comes to believers, it *falls on all flesh*, bringing Pentecost to the foreground as an underscore of the equality of all races, all classes, all genders, and all flesh being dignified through salvation and the Spirit's indwelling (184).

- Imagery and language for the Holy Spirit appeals consistently to female language given the Spirit's presumed qualities and actions (which correlate with views of the feminine—as Mother, as giver of life, as Lady Wisdom; even co-opted as Mary). As the Spirit of Wisdom, the controversy over the meaning of *sophia* (*chokmah* in Hebrew*,* חכמה; *sophia* in the Latin Vulgate) disturbs the neutral Person of the Holy Spirit and embodies it as *Sophia,* 'Lady Wisdom', imparting *her* a creaturely animation which goes beyond the metaphorical.[9] Such has been variously appropriated by theologians of differing persuasions, not just feminist theologians, causing concern for those more conservative to herald safeguarding the historical revelation of the Spirit as a "he" (and more, since Christ typically fulfills the figure of Wisdom in the New Testament).

Boersma concludes these chapters with a sermonic dialogue summarizing the interconnections exposed, emphasizing the unification of all humans under the salvific, free gift imparted, the wisdom given, the infilling and guidance enabled—all pointing to the capacity for a liberated reading of the text as an act of the Spirit. And such includes not only prompting faithfulness in adhering to the canon, but also an understanding of salvation as holistic. This holism does away with prejudices that sideline women and their voices, their leadership in the church, and a preferential regard for male-only language in reference to the multiplex qualities of the Trinitarian God.

In the last chapter before concluding (Chapter 6), Boersma attempts to bring together those significances discussed earlier and necessary for a holistic trinitarian discourse. Some of the material is repetitive of what's already been covered—Boersma may not agree here—since, for example, discussion of the "Father title" has consumed significant sentences earlier; so have arguments counter-patriarchy, and the contexts of feminine language usage in Scriptural references pertaining to all Persons.

His real goal here is to render an understanding that Scripture reveals the oneness of God's being in a three-person relationship, unified in Being and in action. However, "What that means for gendered language about God is far from clear . . ." (254). Boersma thus wants to explore how competing views of the Trinity may affect how humans view God, gendered God-language, and thus their own and each other's relationships in a gendered world.

He discusses views on the nature of the Trinity, these often bifurcated into those that see trinitarian Persons in hierarchical fashion, an "exclusive rule for referring" (254) and for humans to emulate; or others, either downplaying trinitarian differences/titles or attempting substitutions so that Father language can be avoided. At this point, he dives even deeper into the meaning of the Father (and Father-language) in the Testaments, even intertestamental literature, to show that while such may be historically connected to OT patriarchy (inseparable from lineage and God's 'paternalistic' nature), the NT moves it to a loving and compassionate term, inclusive of the use of *Abba*—an intimate Aramaic term characterizing a personal relationship with God; and ultimately, a marker for the Spirit of God. Thus, the Father symbol increasingly

[9] *Chokmah* in Hebrew is a feminine noun (*sophia* in the Latin Vulgate [LXX]). Proverbs 8-9 embodies *chokmah* as Lady Wisdom. However, in reading Proverbs 8-9 one must keep clear in view this is a *poem,* an *encomium* (poetry of praise), which if understood as such makes wisdom *not literally a woman who prepares a banquet,* but rather a literary tool of personification to extol the blessing of being wise. *Wisdom* as an antecedent requires feminine personal pronouns in the Hebrew. The grammatical construction is an artifact of the process of personification, thus satisfying the demands of *diction*, and no more. Lady Wisdom is consequently left animated, embodied, later confused with Mary, elevated to deity, co-opted by feminists, demoted again to a metaphor, then by some an apostasy. Later in the read Boersma tries to salvage the metaphorical Lady Wisdom by showing her influence in liberating his mind to think of the feminine with regards to God.

becomes witness to the messianic and divine status of Jesus; and the Spirit a prompter of us calling out *Abba, Father*—a marker of our adoption into God's family.

None of this dismisses the gendered language, but to Boersma it does open up space to understand how that language was used and eventually "evolves" into an affirmation of Jesus' divine and messianic identity as the Messianic Son (in Hebrew, *ben elohim,* בן האלוהים.) Ultimately, we come to understand that Father means other than a biological relationship; nor does it mean male gender for Father as an ontological name, but rather is used more for the benefit of human convention and analogical reference. In worship and in speech, "it is possible, then . . . to name God in ways that are faithful to what the Bible presents . . . [and] while the Father language is normative in convention, it need not be viewed as [gender] exclusive" (284).

Conclusion

In his finale, Boersma is moved not only to recapitulate each chapter's zest (which I think is now unnecessarily repetitive), but to give instruction ("pathways") for Bible study and communal discernment. All to say, that in looking deeply at the figurative, the metaphorical, the factual, the narrative, we accept the truth of the full dignity of the many possible referents to the qualities and attributes of God. Consequently, and mirroring God, we accept the full dignity of all people. We are to rebuke patriarchal meanings "in a culture that still gravitates to patriarchy" (313); rebuke gendered hierarchies; and affirm that there are different language pathways to reiterate the unconditional love of God. "Inclusive language is more about recovery than revision" (313). Ultimately, "liberation" is about finding our true selves via an authentic relationship with God and with others. This provides liberty in contemplation, prayer, and worship, freely using any and all available grammars.

In his personal *Postscript*, Boersma takes us through his journey, explaining how he came to contemplate God using feminine imagery. Highly revelatory and personal, Boersma's story (kept to a few words here so as not to spoil it for the reader) does expose the interplay of personal family history—growing up Christian in a fractured home—theological training, and exposure to religious biases, ultimately coming into his own even at some interpersonal and professional costs. I was tempted to do some Jungian and Freudian analysis but refrained. He has pursued his personal wholeness—and this work, *this work*, is as much a reflection of what it means to let go of patriarchal thinking as it is a product of one's commitment to live out an egalitarian Christianity.

The work will inform not only theologians—students and academics—but serve as resource and inspiration to social scientists, linguists, philosophers, and other academics of the faith in their quest for a more inclusive understanding of both God and humanity.

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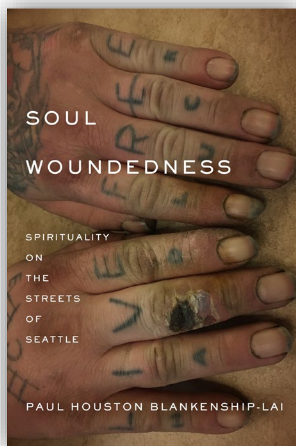
BOOK REVIEW

Soul Woundedness: Spirituality on the Streets of Seattle

By Paul Houston Blankenship-Lai

Reviewed by Camille Petersen



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Perceptions of Reality

In the book *Soul Woundedness: Spirituality on the Streets of Seattle* Paul Houston Blankenship-Lai explores the "relationship between homelessness, spirituality, and culture" among the homeless population on the streets of Seattle. Blankenship-Lai spent consistent and extended amounts of time getting to know the everyday habits and values of the homeless population, especially the younger adult population that he refers to as "street kids". The situation is then portrayed in his book from three different points of view: his own point of view, which leans more anthropological; the point of view of his informants, or the homeless themselves; and the point of view of the organizations and individuals who attempt to assist the homeless population, mainly Christians and Christian organizations.

There are several themes discussed throughout *Soul Woundedness*, including themes such as freedom, love and acceptance. The author explored these themes from several perspectives: anthropological, drawing from many prominent authors of the academic field; religious, taking into account the viewpoint of those giving service to the homeless; and the individual lived experiences of the homeless themselves. This tripart exploration gives a unique view into the culture and spirituality of the homeless population.

Though I appreciated the differing viewpoints that were put forth, I wish that the author had more fully addressed the contradictory themes that I found prevalent with these views, especially in the views from the individuals of the homeless community. For example, freedom was a major theme in the early chapters of the book as Blankenship-Lai discusses the journey many of his informants had that resulted in their becoming homeless. Most of these journeys began with a feeling of oppression or restriction and a desire for freedom.

The lived experiences of the homeless that Blankenship-Lai described were shaped by how they viewed not only their situation but the larger world. "They spoke of apartments and jobs like prisons and poisons of the soul. They spoke of people who weren't homeless as fools who'd been duped by capitalist overlords" (45). Many of these individuals actively chose to become a part of the homeless community in search of freedom. "The stories of how people became homeless in Seattle are rejection stories. They are also freedom stories. On the streets, I propose, rejection makes an experience of freedom possible" (47).

The streets of Seattle were an attractive place for homeless individuals to gather as they are a place seen as particularly suited to living free. "The perceived absence of social judgment renders a particular and

compelling space of freedom present" (48). Many of Blankenship-Lai's informants said that being homeless gave them the freedom that they were craving. However, as Blankenship-Lai followed the stories of individuals it is revealed that this freedom that they craved and supposedly found was not true freedom or, at the very least, not a freedom that could last.

While they professed having found freedom, they also expressed the opposite. "Street kids often told me that they feel 'fucked,' 'stuck,' and 'trapped' on the streets. The real experiential freedom on the streets is always, it seems to me, eclipsed by the cruel reality of street life" (63). One informant called Burrito Bitch said that, "The freedom you find on the streets is real, but it is a freedom that will eventually kill you" (65). Another informant called Lilith staunchly proclaimed the freedom she found by living on the streets until she experienced a painful injury. "'Well,' she said, 'now it is not a choice [being homeless]. Now I need help and to get the fuck out of here'" (65).

The theme of love and acceptance follows a very similar pattern to that of freedom. Feeling rejected by society, their families, religion, and God himself, individuals find what they perceive to be love and acceptance within the community of the homeless. Many of the discussions Blankenship-Lai had with homeless individuals included how good they felt within the community of the homeless. "Most street kids told me that they felt more connected to the human world when they became homeless. I found it surprising that their homelessness could provide a cure for the social isolation wounding them" (78). While they expressed to him how positive the relationships they found on the streets were, like freedom, love and acceptance were only an attractive but deceptive falsehood.

While Blankenship-Lai recognizes the discrepancies in the stories of homeless that were told to him, his view was that freedom, love and acceptance were not deceptive counterfeits—as I interpreted them to be after reading the stories he put forth—but meaningful realities. "Hangout spaces engender care. Since most street kids come from hurting nuclear families, the relationships they form with one another may be considered closer than biological family" (78). The love and acceptance expressed by those to whom he spoke after some time inevitably turned into hate and hurt. "While there is real, transformative love on the streets, the social conditions and personal experiences are dominated by unlovingness and heartbreaking, disorienting absences of love" (115).

Lilith, who was an informant of his for a long period of time, experienced this phenomenon when, "the charismatic street family that had enticed Lilith turned on her. She and Lucifer became objects of derision. They were outcasts among outcasts" (65). Another informant named Hitch was completely rejected from the community after a relationship turned sour. "Reaper and his friend Mad beat Hitch up. They told him that if he comes back to the Ave, they will kill him" (70). The relationships found on the streets, while perceived as strong and loving, do not last. "Relationships are deeply fragile on the streets. They can be life-threatening" (79). In a conversation about love, a couple of informants said the following: "Love," Steady says, "is when someone sticks with you no matter what." This was followed by a retort from his partner Samantha. "You need to be careful, though. Out here, everything you love goes away" (146).

Freedom, love and acceptance are sought after and then claimed to be found by the homeless population, though inevitably it seems they are then taken away by the reality of the conditions that come with homeless living. These same values are then offered by the Christians giving service to the homeless in the form of a loving God. The Christian experiences freedom, love and acceptance through their beliefs, and seeing a human need for these values among the homeless population seeks to share that experience. Ben, a Christian minister who serves the homeless often, told Blankenship-Lai that if he could have any question answered about the homeless individuals he served, "that he'd want to know how people come to believe something untrue about themselves: why people on the streets believe they are unlovely and unloved and without purpose" (121).

Soul Woundedness is an informative and interesting read. There is value in the stories and experiences of both the homeless individuals and the author who was seeking to understand the culture and spirituality of the homeless community. However, I personally do not agree with the conclusions that were put forth. Reading these stories leads me to conclude that individuals are not experiencing true freedom, but rather a counterfeit freedom; they are not finding true love and true acceptance, but counterfeit love and conditional acceptance. A person's perceived experiences do not always reflect reality, though that does not mean that a person's perceived experiences are not important. I believe that one of the purposes of anthropology is to increase our understanding of individuals and communities, and it is through the

expression of a person's lived and perceived experiences that we do so.

This book seemed to have a goal of discovering how those who wish to improve the lives of the homeless should go about doing so. By not addressing the conflicting perceptions of his informants, especially across time, I do not feel that the author was able to pull meaningful conclusions from his data on how to proceed from an anthropological perspective or a spiritual one. Still, the book has a lot of value for the stories it presents from the point of view of those who are experiencing homelessness. While I did not agree with the conclusions the author presented, the experiences described gave insight and information such that I was able to think through my own conclusions.

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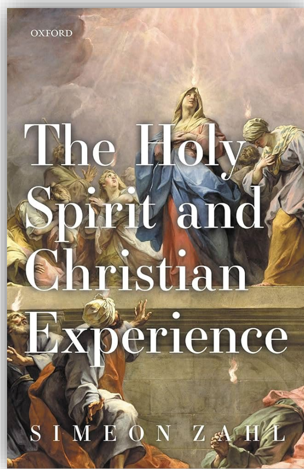
BOOK REVIEW

The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience

By Simeon Zahl

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



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2020

The theologian Simeon Zahl has written a work of constructive theology that reconsiders the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience. For Zahl, the main claims that make up the heart of this book include: firstly a need to include experience in theological studies. He writes, "despite arguments to the contrary, 'experience' cannot really be excluded in theological inquiry . . . [Experiences are] foundational in theological reflection, both in terms of how doctrines develop and how they come to have practical effects in the world, but they are rarely adequately examined or acknowledged" (2). The second claim Zahl makes is "the connectedness of theologies of experience to theologies of the Holy Spirit and the implications of this connection" (3). Thirdly, as each chapter develops, Zahl argues for a pneumatology throughout this study that focuses on the Spirit's work in salvation and sanctification (3).

Methodologically, while this work primarily brings together theology with a particular emphasis on pneumatology, Zahl includes an additional and strategic focus on "affect theory" and embodied practices (3, 7). Pulling from multiple fields, one can see how Zahl is pushing toward interdisciplinary approaches often adopted by scholars in the field of religion. For Zahl, theologians have remained locked in ontological paradigms and have forgotten the ubiquitous role of experience as it pertains to the Holy Spirit and Christian experience from times past to the present.

Zahl's book is broken into five chapters. In chapter 1, he provides an initial description of how experience will be explored in his work. In chapter 2, he argues for "a constructive recovery of the category of experience in theology" as best "accomplished through the lens of pneumology" (7). In this chapter Zahl emphasizes a crucial point: that the work of the Spirit must "take forms that are 'practically recognizable,' in the lives of Christians in the world" and be possessive of both "temporal specificity and affective impact" (7-8). In chapter 3 and 4, Zahl begins to apply pneumatological and affective dimensions of experience to "the work of the Spirit in salvation" (8). In chapter 4, in a similar fashion, he moves to the topic of the "saving encounter with divine grace, through the Spirit . . . [within] embodied experience," and places it in conversation with the theology of Martin Luther (8). Lastly, in chapter 5, Zahl develops what he terms an "affective Augustinian," as a means to explore and interpret the Spirit's embodied experience in sanctification. He relies on "Augustine's theology of delight and desire to provide an experientially and effectively persuasive alternative account" (8).

Returning to chapter 1, Zahl first examines a "history of ambivalence about 'experience' in Protestant theology from Martin Luther to the present," noting how certain long held views have influenced how contemporary theologians negatively view claims of experience (7).

Zahl explores how figures like Martin Luther and Karl Barth navigated between experience and reason.

Though Zahl underscores Luther's experiential depth in relation to his justification of faith, he indicates that both Luther and Barth retreated from "enthusiast" practices (20). And even though Barth returned to God as a "starting point" for theology, pulling theology out of "the modern cul-de-sac," following Barth there was a continual devaluation of experience (33). Zahl suggests that this has caused many theologians to follow in Barth footsteps by "erring on the side of metaphysical description, leaving the practical implications [aside]" (78-79).

In chapter 2, with this backdrop of the trajectory of Protestant theology, Zahl insists on the need to reconsider the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience. Zahl opens up an interesting topic as he begins to explore "pneumatologies of presence," which are similar to concepts explored by scholars of religion like Robert Orsi, Matthew Engelke and Tanya Luhrmann who also consider the role of presence in religious experience (53). Zahl writes, "To a significant degree, the question of Christian experience of God is the question of God's presence as it is perceived in human lives in various forms and under various conditions and with various effects" (53). Showing how expansive and relevant the Holy Spirit is in fields connected to modern Christianity, Zahl summarizes his point that "for theologians from across a number of Christian traditions . . . 'the Spirit' has come to be understood as the best word for the agency that mediates the presence of God to human beings, by establishing the connection between the risen Jesus and the faith and experience of Christians" (57).

Later, Zahl considers how scholars need to move away from vague definitions of the experience of the Spirit, and suggests that theologians must move from mere metaphysical and ontological ideas, to more recognizable, embodied conceptions. He refers to these as "activities of the Spirit that are *practically recognizable* in the life of Christians and Christian communities" (69, author's italics). Zahl pushes against theological abstraction and for a reconsideration of how "biblical accounts demonstrate practically recognizable concrete outcomes of the Spirit's work, such as the experiences connected with Christian initiation, the kindling of holy affections, specific prophetic guidance, healing, and other gifts of the Spirit, and so on" (75).

Zahl suggests different ways to take notice of this *practical recognizability*—using tools of critical theory and psychological sciences to explore temporal specificity and affective impact (78). Zahl also offers an insightful comment: that though one may use new tools and terms to explore the "experience of the Spirit," in practically recognizable ways, such terms should not "lead to an overspecification of the Spirit's work." Rather discussions should remain open, especially since the theological concept of the Spirit is contrary to legalism vis-a-vis the "freedom of the Spirit" (79).

Developing the idea of "practically recognizable experiences" in Chapter 5, Zahl draws from "the pneumatology of Augustine in the early anti-Pelagian writings to resource . . . [what he calls] an 'affective Augustinian' account of Christian transformation . . . which is centered on the category of 'delight'" (183). For Zahl, Augustine's perspective matches Zahl's central subject: capturing pneumatological experience that takes account of embodiment and temporality. Again, this is the biggest thrust of the book: to see "practically recognizable experiences" in both accounts of justification and then on-going sanctification.

As a theologian, Zahl does much hard work reviewing biblical accounts of the Spirit and the inadequacies of theologies to do justice to the body.

Zahl concludes this work with the following statement: "an account of Christian transformation that attends to embodied experience must therefore be open in principle to a very wide—almost endlessly wide—range of avenues and tools for critical investigation" (222). Endless possibilities can afford much when studying new faces of Christianity. As a final comment, I think the author could have provided more examples of contemporary ethnographic works that explore issues of the Holy Spirit and embodiment. Though Zahl is asking for interdisciplinary approaches, I noticed that hardly any existing accounts are mentioned. People studying Christianity on the ground, expanding notions of the Spirit and experience, include scholars like Timothy J. Nelson, Matthew Engelke, Naomi Haynes, Glenn Hinson, and Helena Hansen. The work of R. Marie Griffith would also serve as a strong and relevant example. Yet, one must acknowledge that Zahl is pushing for a conversation across fields of theology and the social sciences. Particularly, this work affords much understanding to scholars studying lived religion and lived theology in Christian communities.

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