

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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Divination, Possession, and Witchcraft: Studying Religious Expressions as a Christian

Johannes Merz

As an anthropologist who is also a Christian I regularly engage with people who have religious expressions and spiritual interests that differ from my own. I have witnessed divination, sacrifices, and possession, and researched witchcraft. In principle, I do not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God, especially if it entails participating in their worship or seeking their favor. Since I found little help in the available literature, I needed to develop my own position. Taking a reflexive and experiential stance, I draw on my background, the people I engage with, and my experience of doing fieldwork. While both anthropologists and missionaries have often viewed religions other than Christianity reductively, I propose that we take people seriously by adopting an empathic attitude. This works well with an ontological, relational, and collaborative approach to anthropology that focuses on studying with people.

The drums play their fast and enticing rhythm. Women, men, and children gather under the shelter in front of the Vodou shrine. The priest has moved his Vodou out onto a small table and sits in front of it. Others join in anticipation, now making up a small crowd of over thirty. As the morning progresses and the sweltering heat builds, the priest finally starts the proceedings with divination. The two halves of a cola nut fall favorably and the sacrificed chicken dies in a good position. Things are well, the ceremony can begin. Suddenly, a woman jerks violently and falls into the arms of another woman. She is led into the room of the Vodou behind the priest and reemerges after a while, now quietly moving to the rhythm of the drums, her face without expression, her eyes closed. A few other women and a couple of men follow. One of the men who is taken by the Vodou holds a knife and tries to cut his left arm, but it does not harm him. People enjoy the event and are pleased with the Vodou and how it manifests itself among them. (Anecdote based on observing a Vodou ceremony, southern Togo, October 1995.)

I attended the event described above in October 1995 at a Vodou or “voodoo” shrine in a village near the city of Lomé, Togo. Events like these that feature possession are part of everyday life in this part of the world, and many anthropologists find them particularly

interesting (see, e.g., Boddy 1994; Montgomery 2017; Rosenthal 1998). Judy Rosenthal, for example, recalls: “I was seduced by all I saw and heard and I wanted very much to merge into the trance state with the spirit hosts” (1998, 7). I, too, was keen to learn more about other people’s religious expressions, but I attended the event with apprehension. Indeed, I felt uneasy from the start. The flurry of different and strange activities felt overwhelming. What was going on? Could I be possessed as well? What had I got myself into? As the ceremony progressed, my unease grew into anxiety. I came close to walking off. Instead, I prayed and stayed to the end.

This event proved significant for me as a Christian and an aspiring anthropologist. I spent some time in Lomé before starting my first research project in the Republic of Benin for my master’s degree (Merz 1998), and I wanted to try out my newly learned research skills. With the help of a local acquaintance, I contacted two Vodou priests in villages outside the city, learned about them and their work and was invited to attend one of their regular ceremonies the following week.

Attending the Vodou ceremony was not only important for me professionally, since it prepared me for future research, but equally central to me personally, since this was the first time I had witnessed a non-Christian ceremony. I realized I had to address

my anxiety about other people's religious expressions, as well as doubts about their validity, but I found little help in the anthropological and missiological literature that I had knowledge of and access to at the time.

In this article, I reflect as an anthropologist who identifies as a Christian on my encounters with people who have religious expressions and spiritual interests that differ from mine. Since I have not always been satisfied with either secular or religious perspectives on other people (Merz and Merz 2017), I am presenting my own approach about how I engage with my counterparts. I started to formulate it during my studies in anthropology in the early 1990s, used it for the first time during my fieldwork in 1995-1996, and have refined it since. I do not wish to present a normative argument, but rather share my experience of doing anthropological fieldwork and reflect on it from today's perspective. In order to do so, I draw on the literature I find directly relevant, whether it comes from anthropology, missiology, comparative religion, or psychology. I hope that others might find my reflections interesting and helpful.

From the perspective of my Christian faith, I have experienced the one we call God, the origin of everyone and everything, and I seek to follow Jesus Christ. As I reflect on how I, as a human and an anthropologist, should relate to other people, I find most of my inspiration in the Bible: Genesis starts with humans being created in God's image, which provides the basis for assuming the unity of humankind in its full diversity, both in Christian theology and anthropology (Larsen and King 2018). The Gospels are about Jesus—God who became human—whose life and teaching focused on people as social and relational beings (J. Merz 2021a). For me, Jesus' advice is crucial: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6, 31).¹ In other words, he called us to be empathic in relating to others, whether friend or foe; that is to strive to understand the feelings of others and engage with them with respect and love.

Based on this, I seek to relate to other people empathically, regardless of who they are, what their background is, or where they come from. This means that I endeavor to be open to anyone irrespective of their spiritual interests or religious practices, but I choose not to get directly and personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God, such as spirits or demons.

I have organized this article into three parts. In the first part, I address the challenges I experience as a Christian doing fieldwork with people of other religious expressions and spiritual interests. I start with epistemological questions about the existence of the devil and demons, since this has often been the framework in which missionaries and other Christians have sought to understand other people's religions. I then discuss the emotions of uneasiness, anxiety, and doubt I felt during the Vodun ceremony. Did I experience a case of what Christians sometimes call spiritual oppression? I acknowledge that there is a link between spiritual experiences and emotions, and see them as part of doing fieldwork and experiencing new and unfamiliar practices and ways of life. Reflecting on such issues leads me to formulate my position towards people who have other religious expressions and spiritual interests.

In part two, I situate my experience and position of doing fieldwork within current anthropology by discussing its theoretical and methodological bases. Anthropologists and missionaries have often dealt with studying religion and other spiritual phenomena, including witchcraft, from an epistemological perspective of beliefs. Some anthropologists have also taken a more experiential approach, often by arguing for the need to take the people we study seriously without being reductive. This leads me to advocate for a relational approach to anthropology that builds on the current trend of studying human experience and action, often from an ontological perspective (Knauff 2024). This includes considering our emotions as we engage with other people, nonhuman entities, and the world around us. By using what I call empathic and critical reflexivity, I seek to understand other people and take them seriously, while also remaining critical and analytical. I conclude this part by claiming that anthropology is a collaborative effort in which we need to "study *with* people" (Ingold 2017, 23, emphasis in original).

In the third and final part, I move from theory to practice. Having presented my approach to anthropology, I then exemplify how it has worked out for me in past fieldwork, when I was collaborating with Jonas Gnammi, a local pastor and veterinary technician. Fieldwork is always messy and I find that sticking to my position and approach does not always work out as I would like. As I get relationally entangled with people

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of other religious expressions and spiritual interests, I often find myself pulled into witnessing activities I might not naturally be inclined to observe. Having had a trusted local person to collaborate with, who was also a Christian, often helped me to navigate difficult situations.

Part 1: My Position

In this part, I explain my position as an anthropologist who is also a Christian towards studying religious expressions other than my own. Taking a reflexive and experiential stance, I draw on my background, the people I engage with, and my experience of doing fieldwork.

On the Devil and Demons

I grew up in the Swiss Reformed Church, where the devil, demons, and other spirits were hardly talked about, and—at least so far—I had never knowingly experienced them directly. Over the years, however, I have met many people, who attest to the devil's and demons' existence and interference in their lives. Their experiences often concerned religious expressions other than Christian ones. This raises questions around the devil's and demons' existence.

In 1992, before I started my university studies, I did a six-month internship in Ghana, West Africa, with a faith-based NGO that focused on linguistic research, literacy, and Bible translation. Most of the people I got to know during this time were Christians who attended churches that had been founded by missionaries. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them, felt privileged to share a few months of my life with them, and relished in exploring other ways of being human and Christian.

At that time, the rise in Pentecostalism in West Africa was already underway (de Surgy 2001; Gifford 2004; Meyer 1992, 1995) and rumors of the devil and demons circulated, for example through Emmanuel Eni's *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness* (1991 [1987]). Within this framework, local religious expressions came to be reinterpreted as demonic. While I struggled to identify with such a perspective, I realized that my lack of understanding resulted from what Paul G. Hiebert calls "the excluded middle" (1982) and asked myself: "What if they are right and I am wrong?"

Other expatriate fellow-workers, as well as a few missionaries I got to know while in Ghana, shared

rumors of missionaries and anthropologists who had allegedly become involved in what my acquaintances considered demonic activities. They usually advised me to be careful about people of other spiritual orientations and to stay away from their activities and ceremonies, such as the ones I described in my opening anecdote (see also Kimmel 2019, 8-9).

On my return to Switzerland, I wanted to further explore other people's ideas and perspectives and so I started my studies in anthropology. Alongside this, I also read some of the Christian literature available in the early 1990s on demons, territorial spirits, and spiritual warfare (e.g. Wagner 1991; Warner 1991), but found such ideas questionable and flawed (Priest, Campbell, and Mullen 1995). Most of these writers approached the topic from a Pentecostal perspective, which tend towards dualistic ideas about God and the devil. While this corresponded neither with my experience of God nor with my understanding of biblical texts, neither could I ignore the views of people I got to know in Ghana.

I found in M. Scott Peck (1983), a psychiatrist who identifies as a Christian, a more nuanced and scholarly perspective, with which I could more easily connect. Discussing the question of human evil, he found a few instances of suspected possession by the devil, which he treated successfully by exorcism. This challenged me to accept that demons *do* exist, but Peck also opined that they manifest themselves considerably less often than implied in the Pentecostal literature on the topic.

As I studied anthropology, I also became interested in the religious practices and expressions that Christians in Ghana and elsewhere now often considered demonic. What were they really about? What would the practitioners themselves say about them? By then, it was clear to me that I could not—and would not—consider *everything* I observed as demonic. Rather, in line with anthropological principles, I need to be open to other people, their lives, thoughts, and practices (see, e.g., Stoller and Olkes 1987; Turner 1994; Wilson 1994).

This raises the often-neglected question of whether anthropologists expose themselves to psychological and spiritual risks when doing fieldwork. How far would I be happy to get involved with different people, especially when they have different spiritual orientations to me?

It was fairly clear to me that I did not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God especially those

that involved participating in their worship or seeking their favor. This meant that I would not have accepted becoming a *sorko* praise-singer and healer in Niger like Paul Stoller (1984) or getting initiated as a *nganga* healer, following the example of Éric de Rosny (1981, 1992), a Catholic priest in Cameroon. Neither would I have accepted the invitation that Edith Turner (1994) received to act as one of the doctors in a local healing ritual in Zambia, nor would I have pushed into a funeral compound against the will of an elder in Ghana as Bruce T. Grindal (1983) did. All these people ended up with unanticipated spiritual experiences.

Doing fieldwork may be unpredictable, but I think that who we are—including our perspective, disposition, and spiritual orientation—significantly contributes to how we experience people and the world around us (Hiebert 2008). This, in turn, affects not only how we engage in doing research but also what we experience. As a Christian, I believe that keeping focused on God, both in attitude and prayer, reduces the likelihood of me confronting what other anthropologists have experienced when they took an active role in spiritual and religious activities: Stoller’s “repelling the force of a sorcerer” (1984, 110), Turner seeing a “spirit form” (1994, 88), or Grindal’s witnessing “the ancestors dance” (1983, 75).

I decided that I would be happy to approach various people and engage with them regardless of their specific spiritual orientations, including Vodou priests in southern Togo, but I would not ask them for services such as divination or performing sacrifices or other rituals for me, nor would I go against people’s wishes or challenge them about their spirituality or religious preferences. I do accept that there is more to the world than meets the eye, but I resist a simplistic and reductive view of demons often found among Pentecostals. Rather, I maintain that various nonhuman entities, such as angels, demons, and other spirits, have a similar status to humans in creation, and can be both good and evil, as well as anything in between (see also Lee 2025, 180-181). Basically, however, I do not wish to become relationally entangled with entities other than God, nor to get indebted to them.

As Christians, engaging with people of other spiritual orientations raises complex questions both about oneself and others (see, e.g., Kimmel 2019; Lee 2025). Dealing with them can easily lead to uneasiness, anxiety, and fear, or a sense of spiritual danger, which results from “the recognition that spiritual forces foreign to one’s tradition are both ontologically real

and existentially (as well as soteriologically) threatening” (Lee 2025, 174-175). At the same time, as Christians, we seek to retain our spiritual integrity, which Michael Rynkiewicz describes “like walking a tightrope and fearing that one might fall off toward ethnocentrism on the right or liberalism on the left” (2011, 134). This is also what I experienced when I attended the Vodou ceremony in 1995 (see opening anecdote). Not only did it leave me with many deep impressions but also questions to reflect on, including how I should interpret the emotions of uneasiness and anxiety I felt during the event.

Reflecting on Emotions

Emotions are foundational for who we are and how we think, live, and relate to others (see, e.g., Barrett 2017; Lutz and White 1986; Mesquita 2022). They also come to play in fieldwork, which is often messy and which many anthropologists typically experience as “physically, emotionally and existentially exhausting” (Nabhan-Warren 2022, 27) to the extent that “it can push us to the brink” (Nabhan-Warren 2022, 27).

Emotions have often been ignored or left at the margins of anthropological fieldwork. They need, however, to be seen as central to learning and understanding (Beatty 2014; Davies 2010; Hammerley and Atkinson 2019, 93-99; Lutz and White 1986; Wikan 1991). More specifically, Joanna Cook (2010) finds that anxiety and doubt are inherently part of fieldwork. Consequently, we need recognize them as part of doing fieldwork, deal with them and respond to them.

As it was the first time that I witnessed the phenomenon of possession during the Vodou ceremony I attended in 1995, it is not surprising, that I experienced uneasiness and anxiety. My feelings were real, but where did they come from and what did they mean?

I knew from other Christians from Europe and America that they can sense what they call “spiritual oppression,”—an awareness of the presence and influence of evil spiritual powers—for example when they venture into places like mosques, Hindu or Buddhist temples, or witness unfamiliar religious activities. In the past, I had never experienced specific emotions when visiting mosques or temples. Attending a Vodou ceremony, however, led me into uncharted territory. Did I experience the spiritual oppression that other Christians talked about? Had I put myself into a

situation of spiritual danger by exposing myself to demonic activity? Or did I simply react to a situation with which I was not familiar and which I struggled to make sense of?

It was clear to me that I experienced a prime instance of what I came to call—together with Sharon Merz—the ontological penumbra, which we understand as “an ambiguous and plural space in which we engage with various counterparts, both human and nonhuman” (Merz and Merz 2017, 1). It is the locus of anthropological research where our emotions, both positive and negative, can make us question our very being in light of the lives of others.

Following the Vodou ceremony, I could not find easy answers to my emotions, but my experience prepared me for my subsequent research in northwestern Benin, where I ended up working with different owners of Tigare and Nkunde shrines (see below), which are related to the Vodou shrines I had encountered in southern Togo (Merz 1998). By then, I had learned more about them, the ceremonies they hosted, and the people who participated in them. I attended further ceremonies and each time, I found that I could handle my emotions better. While I soon reached the point where I no longer felt anxious, my general uneasiness about attending such ceremonies continues.

When it came to attending other events of religious practice in northwestern Benin, I felt better prepared thanks to the writings of Hugo Huber (1968, 1973, 1979), an anthropologist and Catholic priest. During my fieldwork, I often observed people pouring libations and sacrificing to the ancestors, stone shrines, and other entities. People pronounce prayers and petitions to these entities and, depending on the purpose, they use water, millet beer, and sometimes animals. I learned that people do not worship these entities; rather, they address *Uwienu*, the creator God who had withdrawn from humanity. Since people can no longer relate to him directly, they now rely on ancestors and stone shrines, whom they consider closer to *Uwienu*, to act as mediators on their behalf.

Such ceremonies involving sacrifices were different from the Vodou ceremony I attended as there was no drumming, dancing, or possession. Yet, many local Christians condemn these activities as demonic, just as they condemn the Tigare and Nkunde shrines and their ceremonies. Why, then, do local sacrifices not evoke uneasiness for me while the Vodou, Tigare, and Nkunde ceremonies do?

It is well documented that anthropologists often start fieldwork “with insufficient knowledge and become . . . witness to mysterious events that cannot be comprehended” (Willerslev and Suhr 2018, 68). Cook (2010, 246) recognizes that anthropologists commit themselves to experiencing new and unfamiliar practices and ways of life, which typically leads to anxiety. Nutsa Batiashvili, Katie Rose Hejmanek, and Stéphanie Larchanché define anxiety “by excess of meaning, rather than by uncertain or unreal threats” (2025, 778). Accordingly, I find that most of my emotional reaction stems from encountering and dealing with what lies outside my sphere of experience and what I consider strange. During the Vodou ceremony, for example, I found my senses overstimulated, while I failed to interpret what was happening. This hampered my ability to make sense of what I experienced.

While I see a clear link between spiritual and religious experience and emotions (Luhrman 2012), I cannot accept emotions as a general case of feeling what others call “spiritual oppression.” I find that life is far too complex and I cannot reduce all religious practices and spiritual phenomena that I fail to explain from my Christian perspective as manifestations of the devil or demons. I cannot be indifferent when I face other people’s religious practices and spiritual activities, but I want to resist judging them through *my* understanding of Christianity.

Whatever emotions are, they are primarily shaped by our environment and the relationships we engage in, but they are also biographical and experienced personally. This makes them difficult to recognize and address in general anthropological terms (Beatty 2014). Yet, emotions underpin the way we think (Barrett 2017; Mesquita 2022; Wikan 1991). This inevitably leads to different feelings and emotions towards religious practices and spiritual phenomena and thus to different views about them. People who would not refer to themselves as spiritual or religious, and have a tendency to rationalize or reduce spiritual or religious phenomena, still have emotions about them. When it comes to Christians, liberal ones are more inclined to explain spiritual phenomena through psychology, while Pentecostals tend to see demons, but all of them still have emotions. The diversity of people’s perspectives leads to different emotional reactions (see, e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mesquita 2022; Mesquita and Frijda 1992).

Whatever our perspective is, we must be open to the views and opinions of others, while not neglecting

our convictions and commitments either. Resulting complexities, incongruities, and contradictions often evoke emotions. I found that dealing with them reflexively is the best way to learn more about what it is to be human, both in general terms and specifically as a Christian.

This is where I return to anthropology. As an academic discipline, it has a history that starts with anthropologists dealing mainly with epistemological questions of truth and reality, similarly to how I questioned the existence of the devil and demons discussed above. Today, many anthropologists study human experience and action, often from a more ontological and relational perspective. Moving from a structural to a relational approach opens anthropology up to consider emotions as part of relations with other people, nonhuman entities, and the world around us (Batiashvili, Hejtmánek, and Larchanché 2025, 778; Beatty 2014, 550; Davies 2010, 23).

This means that, as anthropologists, we are called to pay attention to who we *are* in relation to others and to reflect on our engagement with our counterparts, which includes feelings and emotions. With all this in mind, I now unpack some theory and methodology.

Part 2: Theory and Methodology

In this part, I discuss how anthropologists and missionaries have viewed religions other than Christianity, often reductively. Against this, I propose that we need to take people seriously by adopting an empathic attitude. This leads to an ontological and relational approach that focuses on studying *with* people.

The Epistemological Basis of Anthropology

At least since Bronisław Malinowski, the goal of anthropology has been “to grasp the native’s point of view” (1922, 25). This was mainly what attracted me to the discipline. How this should be achieved, however, changed over time and depended on the perspectives of anthropologists. In the early days, most anthropologists worked with the premise that a scientific and secular approach was the only valid way to understand other people.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), for example, could masterfully explain how Zande witchcraft worked rationally as a mechanism for explaining misfortune. At the same time, however, he claimed that witchcraft “is imaginary and a man cannot possibly be a witch”

(1937, 119). Reducing religious practices and spiritual phenomena to social functions, however, meant that anthropologists failed to grasp the native’s point of view, since they placed and valued *their* perspectives above the ones of the people they studied: “‘We’ (scientists, Westerners) have knowledge, ‘they’ (lay people, ‘primitives’) have beliefs” (Salazar 2015, 3).

Scholars of religion equally subscribed to a scientific framework and struggled with dealing with religion and religious expressions of other people. The problem is that the concept of religion stems from post-Reformation Europe, which prioritized belief and stressed textual authority following the model of Protestant Christianity (Asad 1993). As scholars studied African and other local religions, they usually found that these lacked Scriptures, dogmas and doctrines. This meant that African and local religions could not easily be compared with text-based religions. For Irving Hexham (2011, 31-45), it is clear that the notion of religion had been biased from the start. This further reinforced the idea that African and other local religions were “primitive” and “superstitious,” even though anthropologists tended to legitimize them rationally.

This negative view of other religions also influenced Christian missionaries, who were part of the modern mission movement that started at the end of the 19th century. In many places, they introduced Christianity as a religion that included not only dogmas, doctrines, and creeds, but also corresponding rules of how to live and behave. Christianity was thus introduced as an alternative way of life.

When it comes to local religious practices and other spiritual phenomena, missionaries typically viewed them either as the work of the devil or as superstitions that would disappear in light of the new faith. This did, of course, not happen. Rather, local religious expressions and other spiritual phenomena, such as witchcraft, often came to be diabolized and demonized (Meyer 1992, 1999; Merz 2008).

Today, I find that most missionaries and Christian NGO workers from America and Europe I have met over the years support the idea of contextualizing the biblical message (see, e.g., Hesselgrave and Rommen 2000), but they still struggle to deal with what many would call the supernatural or spiritual realm. I see a continuing trend that whatever they cannot understand through *their* Christian perspective and *their* understanding of the biblical message, they tend to treat reductively, either with doubt akin to secular

anthropologists, or through a demonizing stance (see also Lee 2015; Priest, Campbell, and Mullen 1995).

Accordingly, ancestors are either doubted or seen as demons that pretend to be ancestors, while phenomena like totemism and shapeshifting (S. Merz 2021) are either deemed fantastic or the effects of demonic manifestations. When it comes to witchcraft, most American and European Christians I have met find it hard, and sometimes impossible, to consider the possibility that witchcraft, whatever it may be in each local setting, might be anything other than evil. The life story of David, a self-declared “witch in the Holy Spirit” (Merz 2008), often presents them with a significant challenge. Declaring all witchcraft as evil means, at least in some settings, that a crucial part of how people “experience spirituality is lost to the demonized form of witchcraft . . . and dealing with it in a Christian way becomes part of deliverance and spiritual warfare that is detached from the morality, and in a sense the spirituality, of humanity” (Merz 2008, 215).

Hexham (2011, 58-59) concludes that African and other religions continue to challenge mainstream theory, especially when it draws on Enlightenment thought, as they are lived and experienced by real people. Since such religions are primarily rooted in practice and experience, explaining them solely in rational terms as a form of belief thus misses the point. It leads to a reductive understanding of religion that its practitioners would not easily recognize.

Taking People Seriously

Anthropology’s scientific and secular approach meant that significant parts of human practice and experience were ignored and excluded. This included feelings and emotions during fieldwork, and how anthropologists become entangled with the people they researched. This continued until the 1970s (Knauft 2024, 86). Accordingly, Laura Bohannon preferred to publish her fieldwork experience under a pseudonym and presented it as a fictional novel (Bowen 1954).

Following this idea of the ethnographic novel, Paul Stoller, described his experiences of becoming a Songhai *sorko*, a praise-singer and healer or sorcerer (Stoller and Olkes 1987). As he became increasingly involved in his apprenticeship, one night he heard footsteps on the roof and felt a presence in his house. He then found that his legs were paralyzed, which he could only resolve by reciting incantations he had

learned for moments of fear like these (Stoller 1984, 99; Stoller and Olkes 1987, 148). He recognized: “Before my paralysis, I *knew* there were scientific explanations of Songhay sorcery. After[wards,] my unwavering faith in science vanished” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 153, emphasis in original).

Similarly to Turner’s (1994) experience of seeing a spirit, Stoller’s field experience led him to conclude: “As anthropologists we must respect the people among whom we work. . . . For me, respect means accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous. I took my teachers seriously” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 229; see also Willerslev and Suhr 2018; Wilson 1994).

The question of the reality of religious experience and spiritual phenomena should neither be denied, ignored, nor treated reductively. Accordingly, Peter Geschiere (1997, 19-22) revisited the question of the reality of witchcraft. By drawing on de Rosny’s experience of real witches (1992, 112-113), Geschiere accepts that if people *believe* in witchcraft, then at least some will seek to use it. He concedes that “one has to at least start by accepting them [witchcraft beliefs and practices] at face value” (1997, 281 n. 12). This blurs the line between reality (knowledge) and fantasy (belief) (Geschiere 1997, 21), thus shifting the question of what is real from abstract Enlightenment thought towards experience and practice, thereby also doubting the validity of the religious-secular divide (Merz and Merz 2017).

In a similar line, Martin A. Mills (2013) revisits Evans-Pritchard’s rationality argument and maintains that witchcraft, at least from a Zande perspective, is not about metaphysics or its rational existence, but rather a question of human action, personhood, and character. In other words, it is about “the temperamental capacity of individuals to maintain the morally appropriate boundaries of human interaction” (Mills 2013, 25). This, however, requires us to abandon the view of the person according to an Enlightenment model of the rational individual, which remained the implicit norm in anthropology until the 1980s (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Strathern 1988).

Relations, Ontology, and Empathy

By drawing on her fieldwork in Melanesia, Marilyn Strathern finds that “persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them” (1988, 13). This leads her to propose the *dividual*, a notion that

collapses the distinction between individuals and society. The significance of this move is that the structures and concepts that anthropologists devised as part of their theories, including society, culture, and religion, are now articulated as relations that are part of people. With this development, the structure of earlier anthropology, that sought to establish what is real and true, is reconceptualized and expressed by and through relations.

Essential for understanding Strathern (1988) is the differentiation between relationships and relations. While the former express how people live together and relate to each other in an everyday sense, relations are more abstract and significant at an anthropological and analytic level. Relations are not only about how people relate to others and the world around them; they are also what explains and constitutes people and their engagement with the world. For Strathern (2020), relations stem from the logic of anthropology that links different ideas together in order to make sense of them. They are thus “at once one of anthropology’s central tools of inquiry and a prime target of anthropological knowledge” (Strathern 2020, 2). This means that we can use relations not only to think about and understand people, but also to engage with them: “Relations . . . are what we do, not what we study” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 120). In this sense, “anthropology is all about . . . relations” (Strathern 2020, 1).

Strathern is mainly concerned with epistemology and thus with the production of anthropological knowledge. Her stance on relations, however, is not only significant for explaining how people and the world they live in work, but also what people *are* and what the world *is*. This shifts her attention to also addressing ontological questions of what it is to *be*, to *exist*.

It is not a surprise, then, that Strathern’s work has been central to the recent ontological turn in anthropology (see, e.g., Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Turska and Ludwig 2023). Ontological anthropology, as a whole, has been described as a diverse and controversial experiment to reflexively reshape anthropology by refocusing it on the question of difference (Bessire and Bond 2014). Today, it brings together a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches (see, e.g., Cipolla 2019; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). I am particularly interested in the British variety (see, e.g., Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Scott 2013), since it is more relational

than structural and thus aligns better with Strathern’s work on relations (Cipolla 2019, 624).

In its basic approach, ontological anthropology is “a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5; see also Turska and Ludwig 2023, 5-9). In doing so, it extends “the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences [to also include the] understandings of the nature of being itself” (Scott 2013, 859). Questions of ontology thus contribute to and complement existing anthropology, thereby allowing anthropologists to also ask what it is for people to exist and how they experience the world around them. This means that religious practices, as well as other spiritual phenomena, need to be taken seriously and at face value, which brings us full circle, back to Malinowski’s aim “to grasp the native’s point of view” (1922, 25) and to Stoller’s conclusion that “we must respect the people among whom we work” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 229).

While up to recently anthropologists mainly used their research findings for descriptive purposes, often using reductive frameworks, anthropologists who have an interest in ontology stress that ethnographic materials should equally contribute to formulating anthropological theory (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Meneses 2021; Merz 2017; J. Merz 2021b). Theory can then emerge from the ideas of other people, as for example recognizing the importance of feelings for thought and knowledge (Wikan 1991) or establishing the notion of the *dividual* and by extension relations (Strathern 1988, 2020). To help us achieve this kind of engagement, Martin Holbraad and Morten A. Pedersen suggest that we ask the following question: “How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?” (2017, 5).

As anthropologists, whether we have spiritual interests or not, we are called to personally and reflexively engage with other people. We need to stop pretending that we ever could be independent and objective observers and analysts of other people and their religious experiences. Rather, we are drawn into relationships with the people we engage with and thus enter relations that entangle us in their lives, also emotionally (Knauff 2024). This raises the question of empathy.

Andrew Beatty (2005, 21; see also Miller 2024, 147) identifies empathy as underpinning Malinowski's call for grasping "the native's point of view" (1922, 25). Empathy is relational and experiential in that it is part of how we perceive others and relate to them, both in terms of similarity and difference (Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023; Throop 2023). It is about "assessing what another person is thinking, feeling, or doing . . . and . . . includes both emotional and cognitive aspects" (Hollan 2012, 71). In a nutshell, through empathy, "we can come to feel what it is like to be the other" (Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023, 2).

We exercise empathy in our daily lives, especially when we relate to others, but we can also learn to be more intentional about it, notably by being curious about other people (Hollan 2023, 102; Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023, 13). This does not mean that we need to discard or relativize our own views, interests, and commitments (Throop 2023, 28), but we need to be aware of the risk of projecting our own emotions onto others (Mesquita 2022, 194-199). Accordingly, anthropologists have recently used empathy for situations in which they have an ambivalent or distant relationship with their counterparts. Examples include studying Pentecostalism as an agnostic (Mossière 2007), researching extremism (Miller 2024, 149-150) and the military, which anthropologists often disapprove of (Mohr, Sørensen, and Weisdorf 2021), or engaging with nonhumans, such as animals (S. Merz 2021; Mezzenzana 2023).

We are our own instrument of research, knowing, and relating (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 18); our own perspective on faith and spirituality matters and must be part of the equation (Howell 2007; Meneses 2021; Merz and Merz 2017; Willerslev and Suhr 2018). Having a faith commitment or spiritual interests can be beneficial in exercising empathy towards people of other religious expressions, but they also pose a challenge, for example due to the uneasiness and anxiety we may feel. The important thing is to deal with emotions reflexively with the aim of turning them into an opportunity for learning and understanding.

As anthropologists, then, we need to position ourselves empathically in relation to our counterparts. Not only do I want to be open to people and take them seriously, I also seek to feel what it might be to live their lives and to empathize with their experiences, even though I do not necessarily wish to have the same experiences as they have.

Empathy is never perfect (Hollan 2023) and in order to move from empathy to understanding, we

need to draw on reflexivity (Throop 2023, 28). By using both empathy and critical reflexivity, I wish to understand other people as much as I can by taking them seriously while remaining critical and analytical in my thinking. This helps me to learn about people's different perspectives and become aware not only of differences, but also similarities, especially in relation to my counterparts. The relational and empathic nature of doing fieldwork means that I become vulnerable, since I not only gain new insights and understanding of others, but these also influence and affect my own views and who I understand myself to be.

I take empathic and critical reflexivity as part of the methodological and theoretical foundation of doing anthropology, especially when we engage with people of different religious expressions and spiritual interests. As much as we appreciate our own perspectives, we should equally seek to value other people's perspectives, even if they may be different, contradictory, and incongruous. In doing so, Eloise Meneses states that we should "neither dismiss nor adopt other perspectives, but rather entertain them as *possible* in order to consider their full consequences" (2021, 484, emphasis in original).

Being an anthropologist, then, is an essentially relational and collaborative activity, even if we have not always recognized it (Lassiter 2005, 16). This means that as anthropologists, we do not actually *study* people. Rather, in the words of Tim Ingold, we "study *with* people" (2017, 23, emphasis in original).

Part 3: Practice

How do my theoretical and methodological propositions work out in practice? I would like to illustrate this from my own experience of doing fieldwork in the Republic of Benin in 1995-1996, which followed on from my experience of attending the Vodun ceremony in southern Togo.

Studying with People in Touga

In November 1995, I moved to Touga, a village near the town of Coby in northwestern Benin, one of the most rural parts of the country. One of the only people I could effectively communicate with in French was Jonas Gnammi, who had himself moved to the village with his family the previous year. Jonas had been recruited by the then new missionary

organization *Ministère International de Jésus* to oversee the first ever church in Touga.

Jonas was not new to Christian work. As a child, he stayed with an American missionary of the Assemblies of God in Cobly and attended their primary school. Feeling the call to become a pastor, he then graduated from their Bible school in nearby Natitingou in 1964.

The *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*, as the denomination is known in Benin today, was founded by an American missionary who moved to the area from neighboring Burkina Faso in 1946 (Cornevin 1981, 453-454). The Assemblies of God have their origin in a Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles, in 1906. Their missionaries, as well as their locally trained pastors, paid attention to the devil and demons. Converts were required to renounce all “pagan” practices, notably by destroying shrines, before being allowed to attend church. Christians then had to follow strict rules including abstaining from visiting diviners, performing sacrifices, polygamy, and consuming alcoholic beverages. They were discouraged from associating with so-called “pagans” and were instructed to refrain from attending their activities, including sacrifices and funerals (Laurent 2003).

As a newly qualified pastor, Jonas worked in several churches in northwestern and southern Benin and gained further experience from living in neighboring Togo and Ghana. In 1977, he experienced problems and left his ministry. After several jobs, Jonas entered public service as the secretary for the prefecture in Natitingou in 1980. Four years later, he trained as a veterinary technician and worked in this capacity until 1991, when he was made redundant when the government reduced public services. He then worked as a veterinary technician privately until *Ministère International de Jésus* recruited him in 1994.

Jonas not only became my main interpreter and assistant, but also a friend and father. He was gentle, humble, and diligent, and it was a pleasure to work with him. Thanks to his varied work experience, he had developed good people skills and an empathic attitude. Retrospectively, I prefer to think of him also as a collaborator, since he contributed significantly to my research.

I loved learning more about the different religious practices of the people of Touga, both non-Christian and Christian. I attended the church that Jonas was overseeing and the congregation quickly accepted me, which I first noticed when they started to invite me to

pray for the sick and afflicted. I soon found that most people attended the church to find relief from the threats of witchcraft. Since starting to attend church and to pray before going to sleep, several members of the small congregation claimed that they had calmer nights. This was an indication that people felt less affected by the witches’ nightly activities. It soon transpired that this was maybe their biggest pre-occupation at the time.

Apart from the church, I also benefitted from the other relationships that Jonas had established in the village. I learned how people dealt with ancestors and stone shrines, and I observed various activities and sacrifices.

Many people in the village had become skeptical, sometimes even disillusioned, about their ancestors and stone shrines, as their petitions and sacrifices did not always yield the desired results. Some people explained that stone shrines and ancestors were corrupt and that they kept sacrifices for themselves instead of passing them on to God. While a couple of men I got to know decided to stop engaging in all religious practices and appeared happy with their decision, many looked for alternatives, either in the new church or by visiting other shrines in other villages.

A Case of Burned Yams

One day in January 1995, the storage shelter, where the chief of Touga kept his newly harvested yams, burned down. This was a huge blow to him and Jonas tried to comfort him, even though he did not attend the church. The chief went to several diviners in the village, but was not satisfied with their verdict about what had caused the fire. He remained restless and then decided to go further afield to seek out a diviner he considered more powerful than the local ones. I asked him if Jonas and I could join him. He agreed.

A week later, we set off early in the morning on our bikes to a village some 15 miles away, the chief carrying a chicken on his handlebars. The diviner he wanted to see proved to be the owner of a type of shrine called Tigare that did not exist in or near Touga at the time. Jonas had met the owner before, but did not know that he had acquired a shrine. It turned out that Tigare, as well as its relative Nkunde, were shrines similar to the one I had visited in southern Togo, but that originated in southern Ghana (Debrunner 1961). Migrant laborers sometimes acquired them in Ghana

and started to bring them back to their villages in the 1950s. While their owners claimed to specialize in fighting the negative effects of witchcraft, many local people were initially skeptical about these new shrines. In due time, however, the shrines' reputation improved, and they experienced a wave of popularity in the 1990s (Merz 1998).

After the chief handed over the chicken and paid a fee, we were asked to enter the house of the shrine. The owner divined together with the chief, a process that remains largely meaningless to those not involved in it. Then, the owner sacrificed the chicken and performed further rituals. The chief seemed pleased with the result. Before leaving, the owner's wife provided us with a meal that included the sacrificed chicken and we returned to Touga before nightfall.

We learned later from the chief that an enemy had cursed him through a sacrifice to a stone shrine in the hope that the chief's whole house would burn down with his family in it. His ancestors averted the curse, but a witch had benefitted from the situation and caused a whirlwind to set fire to the yams.

I felt ambivalent about my first visit to a Tigare shrine and have to admit that I did not particularly like the owner. I experienced his behavior as erratic and weird and Jonas said that he had always been like this. On a more positive note, I was excited by the visit, since it opened up a whole new dimension to my research that I had not anticipated. In order to better understand the people's preoccupation with the threats of witchcraft, I now felt that I needed to also research Tigare and Nkunde shrines. This meant I needed to extend my research beyond Touga, which presented me with new challenges.

Studying with Tigare and Nkunde Owners

Jonas proved to be excellent at finding and relating to Tigare and Nkunde owners. When we encountered difficulties gaining access and relating to them, he patiently and competently dealt with the situation, usually to my satisfaction. I found that Jonas was known in the Cibly area, and he seemed to be appreciated and respected by most people we met.

Jonas' Pentecostal background was evident as he used dualistic notions when talking about God and the devil, for example. His behavior, however, was more empathic and pragmatic. He maintained positive relationships with many non-Christians, such as the chief of Touga. When new Christians continued to seek medical treatment from local healers, continued

to visit diviners, and engaged with their ancestors and different shrines, I never saw him condemning them or intervening. Raising the question with him, he told me that he would give advice to people concerned, but that it would be up to them to decide for themselves what they should do.

As I started to include Tigare and Nkunde shrines more actively in my research, I discussed with Jonas how we as Christians should go about it. By then, I had learned enough about him to be sure of his Christian sincerity and commitment. While I tried to follow my position of researching with people of other spiritual interests outlined above, I also came to rely on Jonas' knowledge and intuition of what he considered appropriate Christian behavior and what he thought would be acceptable for our research.

Before we set off to visit an owner, we prayed for guidance and protection. Whenever we contacted an owner for the first time, Jonas explained that we were Christians who did not come to consult, divine, or seek treatment, but rather to talk to them and learn more about their work. We found that the owners were generally friendly and respectful toward us. Jonas knew that it was not uncommon for Christians to seek out Tigare and Nkunde, typically when prayer and treatment at the local dispensary had failed.

Several of the Tigare owners we met identified as Roman Catholic Christians and said that they attended mass. Such owners did not consider their shrines to be in conflict with Christianity since both were about God, but others distinguished between their shrines and the churches. The latter was the most prominent position among Christians, especially Protestants. Jonas recognized that many Christians would not approve of our visits, but we accepted this as part of the risk of doing this kind of research.

While our approach generally worked well, I quickly realized that my research position was easier to articulate than to practice. Although most Tigare and Nkunde owners accepted our position, they wanted to divine if Tigare or Nkunde was happy about our visit, which usually proved to be the case. Sometimes, the owners also wanted to divine for me and Jonas, and we could not always persuade them that we thought this was unnecessary. Situations like these made me feel uncomfortable, since I was not sure how I would handle the result. In one case, Jonas agreed that the diviner was right in describing an old situation that had remained unresolved for many years. Another time, however, a divination for my benefit predicted a future event that never occurred.

Part of the owners' divination sometimes included sacrificing a chicken, which they provided, and then had it prepared for us to eat. While I felt alright about this, local Christians debated the question of whether Christians should eat sacrificial meat. Jonas felt that it would be better for us to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to Tigare or Nkunde. He then started to inform the owners that, as Christians, we could not eat sacrificial meat. This never seemed to be an issue, since the owners themselves follow dietary restrictions. When they decided to feed us, they killed another chicken especially for us.

Some of the Tigare and Nkunde owners invited us to attend ceremonies during which the shrines' adherents would be possessed in a similar way to the ceremony I described in the opening anecdote. We accepted in a few cases, especially when we felt that we had established a good rapport with the owner in question. I was glad that I already had the experience of attending the Vodun ceremony in southern Togo and that I had Jonas by my side.

Fieldwork is always messy. I found that maintaining my position of not getting personally and relationally entangled with entities other than God, whether spirit, demon, or other, worked reasonably well most of the time. There were occasions, however, when I felt pushed to compromise to some extent. For example, I was not keen to have people divine for me, but since I did not ask or pay for it, I accepted for the sake of maintaining good relationships. In retrospect, I think this was important and worth it.

Working together with Jonas helped me further to think through my understanding, position, and approach to studying with people of different religious expressions as outlined in part one. Jonas took people seriously and accepted that the devil, demons, and other nonhuman entities do exist and interact with people. Since Jonas was secure in his faith, however, he always remained calm and composed. I especially found his empathic and pragmatic stance towards all people refreshing and inspiring.

I had started my fieldwork wanting to understand why people in Touga began to attend their first ever church when prior attempts to bring Christianity to the village had failed. It became clear to me that I could not achieve my aim without learning more generally about the religious and spiritual situation of the village and the wider area, including established religious expressions and other spiritual phenomena, such as witchcraft. This meant that I also needed to work with the owners of Tigare and Nkunde shrines. In seeking

to study Christianity, I ended up spending most of my time learning about other forms of religious expression.

Conclusion

Doing fieldwork is often messy and comes with doubt and anxiety. This is especially the case for anthropologists with spiritual interests or faith commitments, who encounter people of other religious expressions. Questions about the appropriateness of engaging with them, how to go about it, and the spiritual risks involved can easily arise. If anthropologists are serious about their work and research, they have to deal with such issues.

When I started studying anthropology in the early 1990s, it was hard to find relevant anthropological and missiological literature that addresses such issues. Consequently, I needed to think about them largely by myself as I prepared for my first period of fieldwork. I was clear that as a Christian, I do not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God. This is my preference and I found that it generally worked well during my fieldwork, when I was able to further refine my position by working with Jonas Gnammi, my main interpreter, assistant, and collaborator.

My perspective on Christianity and spiritual matters inevitably contributes to shaping my specific position and approach to anthropology, which may not be representative of other Christians. Each anthropologist will have to reflect on their own position, what they consider appropriate to do and with whom they want to engage. Current approaches to anthropology seem especially promising to anthropologists who are Christians or have other faith commitments. Not only do such approaches focus on people, their experience and action, and seek to take them seriously, I also find them helpful when dealing with religious expressions and practices—both the ones of the people with whom anthropologists study and their own.

As an anthropologist, I seek to position myself in relation to my counterparts by practicing what I call empathic and critical reflexivity. This means that I want to be open to people, take them seriously, and experience how they live, act, and relate to each other, even though I do not necessarily wish to have the same experiences as they have. At the same time, I seek to understand people as much as I can by remaining reflexive, critical, and analytical. This helps me to learn about people's different perspectives as well as my

own. Since fieldwork is relational and empathic, I also become vulnerable. This means that my experiences of studying with people influence and affect my own views and who I understand myself to be.

As an anthropologist I find that engaging with people who have different religious expressions and spiritual interests is inevitable and essential. It is not only a potential goal of research in itself, but also crucial when interested in other topics, including Christianity. I hope that sharing my reflections on my experiences of doing fieldwork as a Christian may stimulate others in their own reflections.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect or represent those of SIL Global and Moorlands College, UK, with which I am affiliated.

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The Fossett Framework: A Theological–Anthropological Model of Identity Rupture and Re-Formation

Douglas B. Fossett

Identity rupture represents one of the most destabilizing experiences in human life, disrupting relational belonging, narrative coherence, embodiment, and vocational orientation. While theological anthropology has long emphasized the relational and storied nature of the human person, it has offered fewer process-oriented accounts of how identity is reconstituted following profound disruption. This article presents the Fossett Framework as a theological–anthropological model that interprets rupture as an ontological disturbance rather than as a primarily psychological or therapeutic event. Drawing on Christian anthropology alongside interdisciplinary insights from narrative and trauma studies, the Framework articulates four movements—Rupture, Descent, Turning, and Re-Formation—through which the human person undergoes reconstitution rather than recovery. Identity is understood as a dynamic process of becoming, mediated through communal belonging, relational presence, and theological meaning-making. By positioning community as a theological agent in the restoration of personhood, the Fossett Framework contributes a constructive process-oriented account of identity re-formation to contemporary debates concerning relationality, suffering, and human becoming.

Introduction

Identity rupture is among the most disorienting experiences a human being can endure. Whether caused by grief, betrayal, vocational collapse, or the loss of a defining relationship, rupture destabilizes the coherence of the self and fractures the relational bonds through which personhood is ordinarily sustained (Herman 2015; van der Kolk 2014). Theological anthropology has long affirmed that the human person is fundamentally relational, storied, and oriented toward meaning; yet the field has offered fewer constructive accounts of how the self is re-formed when those relational and narrative structures collapse (Kelsey 2009; Volf 1996).

This article proposes the Fossett Framework as a constructive theological–anthropological model for understanding identity rupture and the processes by which the self is reconstituted. Developed through interdisciplinary engagement with psychology and theology, the Framework interprets rupture not merely as emotional or psychological distress but as an

anthropological crisis that touches the deepest dimensions of personhood.

The Framework unfolds in four movements—Rupture, Descent, Turning, and Re-Formation—each illuminating a dimension of the human person's struggle to regain coherence after destabilization. These movements describe how meaning-making, relational presence, and communal participation contribute to the restoration of identity. While drawing on insights from narrative psychology and pastoral theology (McAdams 2013; Ricoeur 1992), the Framework ultimately advances theological anthropology by offering an account of human becoming under conditions of disruption.

This article stands within constructive theological anthropology, arguing that identity rupture reveals the relational, narrative, embodied, and vocational ontology of the human person. While psychological research serves as an interdisciplinary conversation partner, the Fossett Framework is fundamentally a theological account of personhood under disruption. Rupture is approached not primarily as a clinical

phenomenon but as an anthropological event that exposes creaturely dependence, relational fragility, and the need for ontological reconstitution through communal belonging and participation in divine life.

By situating identity rupture within the broader theological understanding of *imago Dei*, relationality, and vocation, this article contributes to contemporary debates about personhood, trauma, and the dynamics of human becoming (Barth 1960; Bonhoeffer 1995).

Methodological Orientation and Development of the Framework

The Fossett Framework is presented as a constructive theological-anthropological model developed through interdisciplinary synthesis rather than empirical investigation. It is not intended as a clinical protocol or predictive theory, but as an interpretive framework that clarifies how identity is destabilized and reconstituted under conditions of rupture. As such, the Framework functions heuristically: it provides a conceptual lens through which patterns of disruption, disintegration, relational reorientation, and re-formation can be recognized across diverse contexts, including bereavement, vocational loss, relational breakdown, and institutional collapse. Its purpose is not to prescribe uniform outcomes, but to illuminate recurring structures of human becoming that emerge when the coherence of the self is disrupted.

The framework does not originate from a single disciplinary method but from the convergence of multiple interpretive streams. Theologically, it is grounded in an account of personhood shaped by the *imago Dei*, relational ontology, and vocational participation in divine life (Barth 1960; Bonhoeffer 1995; Kelsey 2009). Psychologically and narratively, it draws on insights into identity formation, fragmentation, and meaning-making (McAdams 2013; Ricoeur 1992), as well as trauma research that highlights the embodied and relational dimensions of disruption (Herman 2015; van der Kolk 2014). Anthropologically, it engages accounts of rupture and transformation that emphasize the relational and communal constitution of the self.

In addition to these interdisciplinary sources, the framework is informed by pastoral and observational encounters with individuals navigating bereavement, vocational loss, relational breakdown, and other forms of identity destabilization. These encounters have revealed recurring patterns in how persons experience

the collapse of meaning, inhabit periods of disorientation, and gradually reconstitute identity through relational presence and shared narrative reconstruction.

Accordingly, the Fossett Framework is best understood as a conceptual and theological heuristic that interprets identity rupture as an ontological disturbance within relational and communal life. It is not intended as a clinical model or empirical theory, but as an interpretive framework that illuminates the processes through which personhood is destabilized and reconstituted. Its aim is to provide a coherent account of human becoming under conditions of disruption, integrating theological, relational, and narrative dimensions into a process-oriented understanding of identity re-formation.

Theological Anthropology and the Human Person

Theological anthropology begins with the conviction that the human person is created, sustained, and understood in relation to God and others. Personhood is not a static essence but a dynamic reality shaped through relationality, narrative, embodiment, and vocation (Kelsey 2009; Coakley 2013).

Central to this understanding is the *imago Dei*, which frames human identity as both gift and calling. The image of God is not merely an ontological marker but a relational and vocational orientation: the human person reflects God through communion, agency, and participation in God's purposes (Barth 1960; Bonhoeffer 1995).

Within this framework, identity is understood not as a static attribute but as a relational and vocational orientation. Identity rupture does not erase the divine image, but it impairs the person's capacity to participate relationally, narratively, and vocationally in the life that image signifies. This distinction invites further clarification of the ontological claims guiding the Framework. The term *ontological disturbance* is used here not to suggest an alteration in the essential being of the human person, but to describe a disruption in the person's lived capacity to participate in relational, narrative, embodied, and vocational dimensions of existence. Personhood, grounded in the *imago Dei*, remains intact as a theological constant; what is destabilized is the coherence through which that personhood is experienced and expressed. Accordingly, *reconstitution of personhood* refers not to the creation of a new essence, but to the

reorganization of identity through renewed relational participation and meaning-making. This process reflects what may be described as *human becoming*: the dynamic unfolding of identity through relational and communal life rather than the recovery of a fixed prior state. Within this framework, *relational participation* names the ongoing process by which persons are constituted and sustained through presence, recognition, and shared life with others. Ontological re-formation therefore signifies a transformation in the lived structure of identity—how the person inhabits self, others, and world—while affirming the continuity of personhood as grounded in divine creation.

Re-Formation therefore involves the restoration of relational capacity and meaning-bearing participation rather than a return to a prior psychological state. The image of God is re-inhabited through renewed belonging, embodied presence, and shared vocation.

The storied nature of the self further illuminates the fragility and resilience of human identity (McAdams & McLean 2013; Ricoeur 1992). Embodiment grounds identity in vulnerability (van der Kolk 2014). Finally, communal belonging provides the relational scaffolding through which identity is affirmed and restored (Baumeister & Leary 1995).

Personhood Under Conditions of Rupture

Identity rupture discloses dimensions of human personhood that often remain implicit during periods of stability. When relational bonds, narrative coherence, embodiment, or vocational orientation are disrupted, the self does not merely experience distress but undergoes ontological destabilization.

From a theological-anthropological perspective, rupture exposes the fragility of creaturely existence and the limits of autonomous selfhood. The loss of narrative continuity suspends the person between a past that no longer holds and a future that cannot yet be imagined. Relational disconnection diminishes belonging, while embodied responses further destabilize the person's sense of coherence and agency.

Rupture therefore functions as an anthropological unveiling, revealing identity as continually sustained through relationship, story, embodiment, and vocation. Restoration consequently requires ontological reconstitution through relational presence, communal witness, and theological meaning-making.

Identity Rupture as an Anthropological Event

Identity rupture unsettles the fundamental structures through which the human person inhabits the world (Herman 2015). From a theological-anthropological perspective, rupture disrupts the relational orientation of the *imago Dei*, fractures narrative continuity, and intensifies embodied vulnerability (Baumeister & Leary 1995; van der Kolk 2014).

Understanding rupture in this way clarifies why identity reconstruction requires more than cognitive reframing. The self must be reconstituted through relational presence, communal participation, and theological meaning-making.

The Fossett Framework

The Fossett Framework articulates a four-movement process—Rupture, Descent, Turning, and Re-Formation—describing how the human person undergoes ontological reconstitution.

1. Rupture

The moment of destabilization, revealing the relational and narrative foundations of identity (McAdams 2013).

Rupture names the initial event or realization that collapses the assumed continuity of a person's life. It may arrive suddenly, as in the death of a spouse, or gradually, through cumulative losses that finally overwhelm the self's capacity to adapt. In either case, rupture exposes identity as fundamentally relational and storied. What is lost is not merely a person or circumstance, but the organizing framework through which meaning, belonging, and future orientation were sustained.

Pastoral vignette: death of a spouse

Consider the experience of a woman who loses her husband after decades of shared life. In the weeks following the funeral, she does not simply grieve his absence. She finds herself unable to answer ordinary questions: *Who am I now? Where do I belong? What does tomorrow hold?*

Her days feel unstructured. Familiar routines—morning coffee, shared meals, evening conversations—no longer anchor her sense of self. Friends offer

comfort, yet their presence cannot restore the relational world that has vanished. Even her body participates in the rupture: sleep becomes fragmented, appetite fades, and exhaustion settles in. She describes the experience not as sadness alone, but as disorientation—“like the ground disappeared.”

What has been ruptured is not only attachment, but identity itself. Her role as spouse, companion, and co-narrator of a shared life story has collapsed. The future she imagined is no longer available. She inhabits a space between what was and what cannot yet be envisioned. This dislocation illustrates rupture as an ontological disturbance: the loss of the relational and narrative structures through which her identity had been sustained, leaving the self without its prior coherence.

Workplace restructuring

A parallel form of rupture appears in organizational contexts. A mid-career professional is abruptly laid off during corporate restructuring. The job loss is financially stressful, but the deeper disruption lies elsewhere. Work had provided structure, social connection, and vocational identity. Without it, the person experiences a sudden erosion of purpose and coherence.

Former colleagues disappear overnight. Daily rhythms dissolve. The individual begins to question personal worth and direction. As with bereavement, the loss destabilizes narrative continuity and relational belonging. The person is left suspended between an obsolete past and an uncertain future.

Though one rupture occurs through death and the other through institutional collapse, both expose the same anthropological reality: identity is not internally possessed but sustained through relationship, story, embodiment, and vocation.

Interpretive synthesis

These experiences illustrate why rupture must be understood as an ontological disturbance rather than merely an emotional or psychological event. In both cases, the self loses its organizing center. Relational bonds are severed, narrative coherence fractures, embodied security weakens, and vocational orientation dissolves.

Rupture reveals the participatory foundations of personhood. When that participation collapses, the

self enters a state of suspension. Meaning cannot be quickly reconstructed, because the relational and narrative scaffolding that once supported it is gone.

This is the threshold moment named by the Fossett Framework. Rupture exposes the fragility of human identity and initiates the deeper movements that follow. What emerges next is not immediate healing, but descent—a period in which the person must inhabit loss before any reconstitution of meaning becomes possible.

2. Descent

The period of disintegration and lament reflecting anthropological vulnerability (Lartey 2003).

If rupture names the moment the structure collapses, descent names what follows. It is the prolonged inhabiting of loss, the experience of disorientation without immediate resolution. Descent is not simply sadness; it is the destabilized self learning to exist without the former scaffolding of identity. The future remains obscured. The past feels irretrievable. The present becomes suspended terrain.

Pastoral vignette: prolonged grief after spousal death

In the months following her husband's death, the woman who once managed a full household begins withdrawing from communal life. Invitations go unanswered. Church attendance becomes sporadic. Prayer feels hollow. She describes feeling “numb,” then “angry,” then “empty,” often within the same day.

Well-meaning friends encourage strength or distraction, but neither addresses the underlying reality: she no longer recognizes herself. The roles that once organized her life—partner, confidant, co-decision-maker—have disappeared. Even her body feels altered: fatigue persists, concentration falters, and small tasks feel insurmountable.

This is not regression but descent: a sustained encounter with the collapse of previously organizing structures of identity, in which the self is exposed to its own instability. The self, stripped of former coherence, must confront its fragility. Lament becomes not only emotional expression but anthropological exposure—the realization that identity was sustained through relational participation more deeply than previously acknowledged.

Addiction recovery “bottom”

A similar descent appears in addiction recovery. After a crisis—perhaps a DUI arrest or family intervention—the individual enters sobriety not into clarity but into disintegration. The substances that once numbed or structured experience are removed. Relationships strained by years of behavior remain fragile. Shame surfaces. Isolation intensifies.

Early sobriety often brings heightened vulnerability rather than immediate relief. The person confronts memories, fractured trust, and an unstable sense of self. Without the coping mechanism that once masked pain, the individual must face the underlying rupture. Identity feels exposed, uncertain, and suspended.

In both cases, descent is not failure but exposure. The protective narratives that once sustained functioning have collapsed. The self stands without its prior defenses.

Interpretive synthesis

Descent reveals anthropological vulnerability. The human person, created for relational participation and narrative coherence, cannot bypass the disintegration that rupture initiates. Attempts to prematurely restore stability often deepen fragmentation, because they ignore the ontological depth of the disturbance.

Within the Fossett Framework, descent is necessary. It names the period in which the self confronts its creaturely limits, its dependence upon communal belonging, and its inability to reconstruct identity through will alone. Embodied fatigue, emotional volatility, and relational withdrawal are not pathologies to be immediately corrected but indicators that the person is inhabiting the reality of rupture.

Only within descent does the possibility of genuine turning emerge. Without descent, restoration risks becoming superficial reconstruction rather than authentic re-formation.

3. Turning

The emergence of meaning-making through relational witness and narrative possibility (McAdams 2013).

Turning does not arrive as resolution. It emerges quietly, often unexpectedly, within the vulnerability of descent. It is marked not by the disappearance of pain but by the first signs that meaning might again be

possible. Turning names the moment when the self begins to orient, however tentatively, toward relationship and future imagination.

Pastoral vignette: relational presence after prolonged grief

Months after her husband's death, the woman receives a visit from a longtime friend who does not offer advice or encouragement. Instead, she sits beside her in silence, listens without interruption, and acknowledges the depth of her loss without attempting to fix it.

In this presence, something shifts. The widow does not feel healed, but she feels seen. Later, she accepts an invitation to a small support group. There, she hears others name experiences that mirror her own disorientation. She begins to articulate her story, haltingly at first. The future remains unclear, but she is no longer entirely alone within it.

This is turning; not a cognitive breakthrough, but a relational re-entry in which the self begins to regain coherence through presence, recognition, and shared narrative space. The self begins to take shape again through being recognized, accompanied, and gently re-situated within a shared narrative.

Mentorship following workplace collapse

After being laid off, the displaced professional reconnects with a former colleague who offers practical assistance—resume review, networking contacts—but also something deeper: affirmation of competence and worth beyond job title.

Through these interactions, the individual begins to imagine new vocational possibilities. The narrative of failure gives way to one of transition. While uncertainty remains, the person re-engages with agency. Identity begins to reorganize around emerging relationships rather than lost roles.

In both contexts, turning is catalyzed not by internal resolve but by external presence. Another person holds space long enough for the self to reorient.

Interpretive synthesis

Turning reveals that identity reconstitution is relational before it is cognitive. Meaning does not arise in isolation but through encounter. The wounded self requires a witness—someone willing to remain present within ambiguity.

Within the Fossett Framework, turning marks the initial movement toward re-formation. Narrative possibility reappears. Relational trust begins to rebuild. The person does not yet inhabit a new identity, but the conditions for becoming are established.

This moment underscores a central claim of the Framework: community functions as a theological agent in restoration. Through embodied presence and mutual recognition, relational spaces reopen pathways for meaning-making. Turning is the threshold where rupture begins to yield to reconstitution.

4. Re-Formation

The emergence of a reconstituted self grounded in renewed belonging, narrative coherence, and vocational clarity (Volf 1996).

Re-Formation names the gradual emergence of a reconstituted self. It does not signify a return to a previous identity, nor does it imply the erasure of loss. Rather, it marks an ontological shift in which the person inhabits a changed reality with new coherence. The past remains part of the story, but it no longer defines the limits of becoming.

Pastoral vignette: inhabiting life after loss

Over time, the woman widowed by her husband's death begins to participate again in ordinary life. She volunteers at a community center, reconnects with friends, and establishes new rhythms in her home. Grief still surfaces, often unexpectedly, but it no longer dominates every waking moment.

She speaks differently about herself. Where once she described only what had been taken, she now names what is emerging: deeper empathy, a quieter strength, a renewed sense of purpose in accompanying others through loss. Her identity has not been restored; it has been re-formed. What emerges is not a return to a previous self, but a reconstituted identity in which loss has been integrated into a new configuration of meaning, relational belonging, and vocational orientation. She remains marked by grief, yet she also embodies a new posture toward life.

Vocational reorientation after disruption

The professional who lost his job eventually secures new employment, but more significantly, he approaches work differently. He sets clearer

boundaries, invests more intentionally in relationships, and pursues mentoring opportunities. The disruption prompted a reassessment of values and priorities. Success is no longer defined solely by advancement but by meaningful contribution.

Here too, identity has shifted. The rupture becomes integrated into a broader narrative of growth and reorientation.

Interpretive synthesis

Re-Formation reflects the ontological reorganization of the self through renewed relational participation, narrative coherence, and vocational orientation. Healing is not the recovery of a former identity but the emergence of a reconstituted one. The person carries forward the memory of rupture while inhabiting a new way of being.

Within the Fossett Framework, Re-Formation represents human becoming in the aftermath of disruption. Identity is reconstituted through communal belonging and sustained relational presence. The self regains coherence not through solitary effort but through participation in shared life.

This movement clarifies why restoration must be understood theologically rather than therapeutically alone. The person does not simply adapt; they are re-formed through grace mediated by the community. Re-Formation affirms that suffering does not negate personhood but reshapes it, opening pathways toward renewed meaning and vocation. A critical distinction emerges at this point between recovery and re-formation. Recovery, as it is often understood within therapeutic and popular discourse, implies a return to a prior state of functioning—a restoration of the self as it existed before disruption. Such a model assumes that the pre-rupture identity remains the normative reference point toward which healing should aim. By contrast, re-formation reflects a different anthropological and theological account of human becoming. The self that emerges after rupture is not a reinstatement of what was, but a reconstituted identity shaped through the integration of loss, relational re-engagement, and renewed meaning-making. This distinction is not merely semantic but reflects a deeper claim: rupture participates in transformation rather than interrupting it. Theologically, this aligns with accounts of formation in which the human person is not restored to an original static condition but is continually being formed through participation in relational and communal life. Re-formation therefore

names a process in which suffering becomes integrated into the unfolding of identity, not as a detour from becoming, but as one of its constitutive conditions.

For clarity, the four movements of the Fossett Framework may be understood as a coherent process describing the reconstitution of identity under conditions of rupture:

- *Rupture* names the collapse of relational, narrative, embodied, and vocational coherence, exposing the participatory foundations of identity.
- *Descent* describes the sustained inhabiting of disorientation and disintegration, in which the self confronts its vulnerability and the loss of prior meaning structures.
- *Turning* marks the emergence of relational reorientation, where meaning begins to reappear through presence, recognition, and shared narrative space.
- *Re-Formation* signifies the ontological reconstitution of the self, as identity is reorganized through renewed belonging, narrative coherence, and vocational direction.

These movements are not strictly linear stages but interrelated dynamics through which the human person undergoes re-formation. Together, they provide a conceptual map for understanding how identity is destabilized and reconstituted through relational participation and meaning-making.

Rupture and the Transformation of the Self: A Comparative Anthropological Conversation

Recent anthropological work on Christian conversion offers a valuable comparative lens for understanding identity rupture. Scholars examining evangelical movements across diverse cultural contexts describe conversion not merely as religious affiliation but as a profound transformation of the self, often catalyzed by moments of discontinuity they term “rupture.” These ruptures destabilize prior ways of inhabiting the world and initiate processes of reorientation involving embodiment, relationality, and meaning-making (Robbins, Schieffelin, and Vilça 2014).

In this literature, rupture marks a break in continuity that exposes the constructed nature of identity. Conversion is understood as involving shifts in interiority, communication, relational boundaries,

and moral orientation. Individuals encounter a disruption that renders former narratives insufficient, requiring the adoption of new interpretive frameworks through which the self is reconfigured. Anthropologists document how such transformations are mediated through community practices, embodied disciplines, and emerging narratives that reorganize personal and social life.

What is striking in these accounts is the recognition that rupture is not limited to religious experience. Rather, it functions as an anthropological category describing moments when identity becomes unstable and must be renegotiated. The converted self is not simply persuaded cognitively; it is reshaped through relational participation and altered modes of belonging. Rupture thus reveals identity as dynamic and relational rather than fixed.

The Fossett Framework converges with this anthropological insight while extending it beyond conversion contexts. Whereas anthropological analyses primarily describe how rupture reorganizes the self, the Framework offers a constructive account of how reconstitution unfolds across multiple domains of human experience. Bereavement, institutional collapse, trauma, addiction recovery, and vocational loss produce disruptions structurally similar to those observed in conversion: narrative suspension, relational dislocation, embodied vulnerability, and the erosion of prior meaning systems.

In each case, rupture initiates a sequence not unlike that observed in anthropological studies of conversion. Individuals enter descent, confronting vulnerability and disintegration; they encounter turning through relational witness and emerging narrative possibility; and they move toward re-formation as identity is reconstituted through renewed belonging and vocational orientation. What differs is not the structure of rupture but the interpretive horizon within which restoration is understood.

Anthropological literature primarily analyzes rupture descriptively, tracing how cultural systems facilitate self-transformation. The Fossett Framework builds upon this insight by offering a theological-anthropological account of restoration following rupture. It conceptualizes re-formation not merely as adaptation but as ontological reorganization mediated through communal presence and theological meaning-making. Identity is not reconstructed through individual effort alone but reconstituted through participation in shared life.

By placing rupture within a broader account of human becoming, the Fossett Framework contributes a constructive dimension to existing anthropological conversations. It affirms that rupture exposes the relational foundations of personhood while also naming the pathways through which coherence can re-emerge. In doing so, the Framework bridges descriptive anthropology and theological anthropology, articulating how disrupted selves are restored through grace-infused relational processes that transcend any single domain of experience.

While anthropological accounts of rupture provide rich descriptive analyses of how selves are transformed within particular cultural and religious contexts, they do not typically offer a constructive account of how identity is reconstituted following disruption. The Fossett Framework extends this conversation by moving beyond description toward a theological-anthropological articulation of re-formation as a relational and ontological process. In doing so, it not only affirms rupture as a fundamental feature of human becoming, but also clarifies the conditions under which coherence may re-emerge through relational participation, communal presence, and meaning-making grounded in theological anthropology.

Contributions to Theological Anthropology

The Fossett Framework contributes to theological anthropology by offering a process-oriented account of identity re-formation under conditions of rupture. First, it conceptualizes rupture not as a primarily psychological or emotional event, but as an ontological disturbance that disrupts the relational, narrative, embodied, and vocational coherence through which personhood is lived. Second, it articulates identity not as a fixed essence to be recovered, but as a dynamic process of becoming, in which re-formation emerges through the integration of loss rather than a return to a prior state. Third, the Framework locates the work of restoration within relational and communal participation, positioning community not as a secondary support but as a theological agent through which personhood is reconstituted. Finally, it reframes healing as re-formation rather than recovery, emphasizing that the self is not restored to what was, but is reconstituted through renewed participation in shared life.

While Kelsey emphasizes identity grounded in divine address and Volf highlights reconciliation

through relational embrace, the Fossett Framework attends specifically to the anthropological dynamics of rupture that render the person unable to meaningfully receive divine address or inhabit relational reconciliation without prior reconstitution. By naming these dynamics, the Framework extends theological anthropology's account of becoming by articulating how personhood is reconstituted when relational, narrative, and vocational structures collapse.

By engaging anthropological accounts of rupture and self-transformation, the Fossett Framework extends theological anthropology beyond descriptive analysis to offer a constructive model of identity re-formation across bereavement, institutional loss, trauma, and vocational disruption.

Conclusion

Identity rupture exposes the relational fragility of the human person across pastoral, institutional, and personal domains. The Fossett Framework offers a theological-anthropological account of re-formation through Rupture, Descent, Turning, and Re-Formation, demonstrating that identity reconstitution is not merely psychological recovery but ontological transformation.

By integrating lived experience with interdisciplinary insight, this article has shown how disrupted selves are reconstituted through relational participation and renewed narrative coherence. In conversation with anthropological accounts of rupture and self-transformation, the Framework advances a constructive model of human becoming that extends beyond religious conversion to encompass bereavement, vocational loss, trauma, and identity destabilization.

Human becoming unfolds not in isolation but through grace-mediated participation in shared life. Rupture does not interrupt the formation of identity; it reveals the conditions under which identity is always being formed. The Fossett Framework affirms that restoration emerges relationally, as persons are re-formed through community, meaning-making, and renewed vocational orientation.

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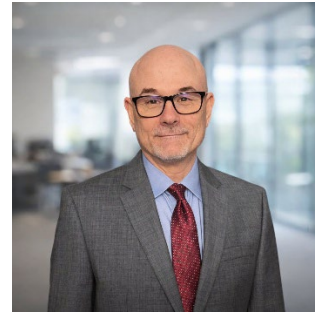
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Latinx's Testimonies on the Margins of Street-Life: Fragments and Tears

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This article examines two Latinx testimonies connected to street life in San Bernardino, CA, a Hispanic majority city in the Inland Empire. The city of San Bernardino has undergone high levels of urban decline, which in turn has created a web of urban issues, such as a rising unhoused population, high levels of urban violence and other issues of street life (drug usage, gangs, etc.) In the process, street ministries have emerged in the city and have attempted to assist people on the margins. In spaces like street ministries, non-traditional testimonies appear and remind us of narratives, which I term *testimonies on the margins*, that operate outside of more institutional spaces of religion. While traditional conversion narratives can have their own narrative arcs, what are we to make of testimonies of the street life that appear in pieces or fragments, and of women that transform their wounds to factors of healing? Exploring Latinx testimonies on the margins of San Bernardino as “fragmented testimonies” and “testimonies of tears,” this article reads these testimonies as overlooked accounts of how Latinx voices survive and heal from their social-historical conditions, compounded with issues of street life. It proposes that, while unorthodox, these testimonies are attempts to heal from wounds of street life—*wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*.

Introduction

The transient streets of San Bernardino, CA have changed in the past decades. As I walked down its infamous E Street and through the downtown area, I saw some murals that reflected the city's once prized cruising culture connected to the “Mother Road,” Route 66, and other murals of the city's old railroad stations and booming citrus industry.¹ Such paintings echo the city's heyday and its long history of industrious and transient roads. In the early twentieth century the railroad industry created jobs that focused primarily on transporting goods, and with its emphasis as a “transportation center,” the city would become known as the Gate City or the pass-site city. Further, as more super freeways were constructed in California, the freeways that were made in San Bernardino only caused more drivers to simply “pass through,” helping

to “sustain the city's image as a ‘gate’” (Jones & Palmer 2002, 40-41). With the passing of time, indeed the streets of the city have changed. As I walked further down E Street, the emptiness of downtown, the makeshift tents of unhoused people propped up against walls, the closed down malls and empty shopping centers, and the waste across the sidewalks only told of San Bernardino's modern history of decline.

In this Gate City, through my urban ethnographic work, I have sought to understand how religion engages and interacts with street-life. As I walked down E Street to explore the urban space of San Bernardino, I noticed over five Hispanic storefront churches and one larger Hispanic congregation in this short five mile radius [see figures in the appendix below] and decided to take pictures of them, along with several other

¹“Art & History.” *The Enterprise Building*. Accessed February 24th, 2026. <https://www.theenterprisebuilding.com/art>. To view different murals in E Street reflective of San Bernardino's history, visit this website above.

churches on this street.² The ubiquitous appearance of such Latinx storefronts reminds us that 70.2% of the city's population consists of Hispanics, making the city a majority Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau). To understand further how the streets and Christianity interweave in conversation with Latinx identity, I have been visiting different urban churches and street ministries. Amidst San Bernardino's transient streets, I have learned about *testimonies on the margins*.

During one of my regular visits to San Bernardino, I walked out of a service hosted by Hope City Church (HCC), where one Hispanic man shared about his experiences of street life in San Bernardino. His testimony, intermingled with tears, was full of vivid accounts of gang life, gun shots and wounds, vicious cycles of drug addiction and alcoholism, and other cycles of going in and out of jail. It was a testimony that captured street life at its finest.

Often at HCC, a small shabby rented building located on the corners of W Seventh Street and N H Street near the I-215 freeway, a group of evangelicals gather to feed and clothe the poor, share the Christian message and to tell their testimonies.³ This street ministry is led by an African American man named Pastor Jim Willard.⁴ Jim was born in the 1960s and grew up in Lynwood CA. Full of pastoral experience, he has served as a pastor in various urban congregations, including churches in Compton, CA. Since 2014, he has been the main pastor in HCC, serving the streets of San Bernardino. For context, in 2024, the number of people living on the streets in the county of San Bernardino was at an all time high with over 4,255 people. Out of this total, 1,417 of them were residing in the city of San Bernardino alone (Yarbrough 2025). Several urban churches and street ministries, like Hope City Church, responded to this growing problem, and through their religious and

social efforts have worked to care for people living on the streets.

Some of the Christians and attendees that come in and out of HCC are familiar with the streets of San Bernardino in intimate ways. As I walked out of a service on one Sunday afternoon, I sat across from a Hispanic man named Manuel at a table set up right outside of the church building. HCC was providing a late lunch for the attendees, and I decided to stay to chat with a few members. Manuel Ybarra, or Manny, is a bulky Hispanic man with several tattoos all over his arms. He often wears sun glasses with a snapback. Though his past life is strongly tied to the realities of street life, he is now a very calm person and attends HCC every week. He proudly calls it "his church." He sometimes comes with his mom and step-dad.

While sitting across from him, Manny spoke about the day when he first learned his real name. He was 12 or 13 years old and a letter came in the mail. It was his birth-certificate. He showed his mom and said: "Mom, who is this? Is this my brother? Does he have the same birthday as me? Who is Manuel?" They discovered together that it was his name. Apparently, his family used to just call him Tony or Anthony, which is Manny's middle name. Even at a young age, Manny's name was lost and needed to be found. As one can imagine, this created practical problems while he was attending school. Since the school used the name Tony they did not have his actual name. Manny even said he got a tattoo of his name, but misspelled it as: *Manual*. This question—Who is Manuel?—becomes a question that reflects the fragmented pieces of Manuel's life and identity that he was searching to restore. While we sat together, Manny tried to share with me his testimony, but his memories seemed scattered as he tried to piece his story together. Though fragmented, this testimony reflects an intimate weaving or even entanglement (Offutt 2023) of Christianity and street-life, and a story from the margins about survival. In the face of *wounds of erasure*, Manuel's telling of his testimony can be read as an attempt to resist

²In a way reminiscent of Kevin McCollister's (2009) images of Latinx Storefronts in East Los Angeles, I decided to walk down E Street to take photos of the storefronts on this infamous road in order to explore the urban religious make-up on this street. I discovered a strong Latinx evangelical presence therein.

³It is worth mentioning that while this group adheres to traditional evangelical beliefs, some regular volunteers were dismissive of "titles," and often identified themselves with a more authentic or "true" Christian faith.

⁴While not the main focus in this article, I included some brief background information of both of the spiritual leaders of two street ministries where I have carried out fieldwork to provide some context. Both of their names (Jim & Gus) are used with their permission.

erasure, heal from its wounds, and assert and reclaim his identity.

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Another street ministry that is serving in the city of San Bernardino on 29th and E street, called Celebrate Center Ministries (CCM), is also working to serve the poor and unhoused community. The group is led by the spiritual leader and chaplain Gualbert Augustin (aka Gus), who possesses an Afro-Caribbean background. Like Pastor Jim, Gus was born in the 1960s and has been serving the streets of San Bernardino for close to a decade. CCM meets outdoors on Saturday mornings in a church parking lot, and sets up tables full of food and clothing. On most Saturdays, they also provide a variety of medical and health services to the community. Among several volunteers, one Hispanic woman named Francine, serves at CCM frequently. Often as I visited and volunteered, I saw her sitting at tables and conversing with people who were in distress, in need of prayer, worn out and pressed by the conditions of street life. Giving them her full attention, Francine listened to them, shared with them about her own experiences of street life, offered spiritual help and prayed for them. Even if people came off the street, after their conversations she often gave them a tight hug and reminded them that God loves them.

In my first conversation with Francine, she told me that she grew up in Los Angeles and in the San Pedro area. She recalled to me that at a young age she became an orphan because her mother committed suicide by driving off a bridge. Following this, Francine went

through several hardships, and at one point, she herself ended up homeless. She said to me with tears that she remembers when she first moved to the Inland Empire and she was struggling, stretching out her hands and asking people for help. She was on the receiving end. Now, these hands are giving back to the streets of San Bernardino, assisting people and praying over their lives. Despite such multi-layers of losses, Francine has found ways to transform these *wounds of loss* into a means to bring spiritual healing to others.⁵

Testimonies on the Margins

Many conversion stories or testimonies are not linear or culturally static. They do not always neatly fit within the traditional conversion accounts that have a singular dramatic crisis with a redemptive arc (eg. Saul of Tarsus, Augustine) nor a slow and steady gradual development with definitive stages (eg. Bunyan), but oftentimes involve numerous crises tied to one's cultural context.⁶ They in turn become complex processes which may require diverse disciplines across the social sciences and humanities to study and understand them further (Rambo 1993). They need to take into account, for example, the context to understand an "ecology of conversion" (166) and its own cultural peculiarities. When these are understood, we begin to see how conversion stories may serve as a "foundational testimony" in an embedded context (Ramirez 2025).⁷

Of course, traditional narratives are significant and relevant, yet as Lewis Rambo (1995) mentions, drawing from John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's notion of "conversion motifs," conversion narratives

⁵In relation to my informant's names, Francine is a pseudonym. However, Manuel desired to use his real name. He specially told me, "I wouldn't feel right giving my testimony and changing my name." To honor his desire, I kept his name as is.

⁶In the traditional sense, even St. Augustine's conversion experience has been described as following the "Pauline crises," yet simultaneously following a gradual process as well (Hawkins 1985). Conversion narratives, in this sense, follow a "triadic pattern of spiritual searching, followed by conversion, followed by spiritual certainty" (Hawkins, 21). John Bunyan's account steers more so in the direction of a gradual process "made up of series of definite stages" (22). While these narrative arcs are significant and even relatable to many, it is equally important to keep in mind that conversion narratives do not always have definitive stages and are always influenced by "the theological and cultural milieu[s] from which both life and autobiography derive" (22).

⁷In her work, *Pentecostalism in Urban Oaxaca*, Michelle Ramirez (2024) focused on what she terms a "foundational testimony" of a man named Don Pedro, which had a strong significance and influence on a local church community in Oaxaca. Noting its relevance to its context, she writes: "This foundational testimony was embedded within larger cultural discourses of masculinity and alcohol that provide powerful evidence of God's healing power" (60). In order to strengthen her point, I think Ramirez could have used a different term rather than "foundational testimony" to instead emphasize the uniqueness of the cultural or social context, or the experience of the one giving the testimony.

take on many different shapes and can possess their own set of dynamics and features. For example they can appear as possessing *intellectual*, *mystical*, *experimental*, or *affectional* dynamics, or they can possess elements akin to *revivalism*, or even be *coercive* (14-16). Rambo reminds us that such narratives are not static or simple. Building off these authors, he proposes a stage model that is more *process oriented*; yet, even with this proposal he suggests a “spiraling effect” and “a going back and forth between stages” (17). Rather than using a sequential paradigm when studying conversions, he suggests one that is systemic, which takes into account aspects like context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (17-18). How these aspects disrupt linear narratives, and relate and interact with one another during the process of conversion, only highlights the phenomena’s complexity further. This reminds us that conversions can be “messy” and unorthodox.

This does not mean we should overlook the power of unique conversion stories. Robert Wuthnow (2023) reminds us of the relationships between religious discourses and power, highlighting the different ways religious narratives possess their own influence upon the lives of ordinary people (54). For example, he explores ideas like the “founding myth” (70) showing how one story can bind a group together in terms of “divine guidance and growth,” fostering trust and creating a sense of collective identity (70-71). Empowerment comes from the first narrative of transformation—typically the founder of the group—and carries over into the lives of other members (71).

However, what do we make of Christian testimonies that are not always heard, or that seemingly

do not represent what is expected? What of the testimonies of common men struggling with addiction and alcoholism that appear as stories that are shattered, re-arranged, unclear and complex—or to use Stanley Brandes’ (2002) words to describe *historiales*⁸—“small fragments of a . . . story—sometimes tentatively interconnected, sometimes entirely discreet from one another” (81)? And further, what do we make of the testimonies that are full of spiritual lessons and miraculous events, yet not told by a traditional male figure or leader, but by a woman serving on the streets, and thus stand “outside the narrative forms of ordinary evangelical culture” (Griffith 1997, 16)? Voices deemed as legitimate sources of power become flipped, and power is granted to unexpected voices. The voices of people—not coming from the pulpit—can be brushed off to the side, but can such testimonies, that are not always centered, teach us something about a community or the places in which they reside? This article explores what I term *testimonies on the margins*—which are filled with multiple street-life wounds (such as crises); they are testimonies directly interconnected with street-life.⁹

Testimonies, in Christian thought and literature, are typically conversion narratives, which are told to tell the tale of one’s religious transformation with the goal of evangelization. Among evangelicals they are regularly shared as a way to talk about their faith and how it has shaped their life (Luhmann 2012). Different scholars have noted the empowering effects of testimonies, their connections to religious identity formation, religious socialization and the fostering of unique religious experience (Wuthnow 2023; Hansen 2018). It has also been noted how testimonies are an egalitarian religious practice among storefront

⁸In his work on studying A.A. in Mexico, Brandes (2002) highlights how members of this group tell their *historiales* or “personal stories.” Typically they involve retelling the “shameful, humiliating deeds, carried out while an active alcoholic” (44). Brandes’ focus on these types of fragmented stories center narratives that come from ordinary men and that are not linear. They are told in pieces and struggle to maintain coherence; in this article, I consider fragmented testimonies that have a similar nature.

⁹The practice of *testimonio* has informed much scholarship that engages personal narratives in the U.S., such as critical race theory, Latinx Studies, and other critical studies. Indeed, in line with this article, *testimonios*, especially in Latinx studies, have been a means of—to name a few—self-reflection, social awareness, speaking out against oppression, memory reconstruction and survival (Reyes & Rodríguez 2012). As a short definition of the practice, scholars have noted: “This type of writing entails a first person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness” (Reyes & Rodríguez, 525.) Often the goal of *testimonio* “is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (525). As early as the 1960s, several thinkers outside the U.S. (including Latinx scholars) drew on *testimonios* to write narratives in the first-person, describing selected social events as “unjust or illicit as stamps of oppression” (526). Several Chicana scholars in the 1980s and 90s drew on *testimonios* in a reflective fashion “using such concepts as agency, subaltern, or native” (526). In these respects, an important goal of *testimonios* is liberation, especially from historical and social forms of oppression (527).

churches that allow laity to participate in religious services (Solivan 1996). Testimonies can also function as “resistant narratives,” which people share to subvert structures of power, create counter stories to the “singular stories” or dominant stories told about them, and to reinterpret their life (Dunlap 2021). I am in agreement with these views, especially with Susan J. Dunlap’s perspectives, and would like to add that *testimonies on the margins* afford and offer means of healing the wounds of street life—both in *content* and in *structure*.¹⁰

Specifically, testimonies on the margins—even though in pieces or less orthodox—still have the ability to “shape the self by narrating it into an archetype of trial, decision, and transformation,” and can inject “life with a sense of significance and forward motion” (Hansen 2018, 37). Yet this shaping of the self is not told with ease. It is told with struggle as one recalls and revisits wounds. Yet, in face of the numerous wounds of street life, which include *wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*, the attempt to repeatedly and constantly recreate a sense of self and recenter one’s significance through testimony can be a means of healing.¹¹

Under the looming practices of institutional religion, many testimonies in the pews can go unheard. Testimonies from the pulpit may be given more attention and the ordinary voices of men and women can become lost; thus, representations of communities at times are not adequately presented. Often, non-traditional religious spaces—like storefronts and street ministries—become spaces that allow practitioners to share their stories, especially women (Solivan 1996). Further, in these spaces, fragmented and silenced testimonies are able to shed light not only on the communities they exist in, but on social-historical experiences of ethnic-religious identities (Gonzales 1996). Indeed, such religious stories can be told in pieces and enveloped in tears, yet despite their non-

traditional features, they echo how people on the margins survive, experience religion and spiritual healing in their Christian lives.

Fragments & Tears

Centering Latinx voices on the margins, what might such broken stories and broken hearts tell us? Perhaps they represent larger *broken histories* and *social wounds* many Hispanics communities experience when their worlds are interwoven with drugs (Garcia 2010), gangs (Duran & Campos 2019; Contreras 2024) and other problems of street life, and how they are trying to reconcile with these issues, turning to religion in the process. Out of these conditions, testimonies on the margins can appear in various ways: in this article, they will be explored as *fragmented testimonies* and *testimonies of tears*. A common thread between these two is their experience of healing in conversation with wounds of street life. Physical and spiritual healing are explored in these testimonies—yet, in my view, what is in the process of being healed include the *wounds of erasure* (in the case of Manuel) and the *wounds of loss* (in the case of Francine). The stories people tell, even if they are not from the pulpit, still hold significance because they remind us how those on the margins heal.

Fragmented testimonies that do not have a full sense of cohesion and logical sequence remind us of social realities of Hispanic individuals whose lives feel displaced, yet nonetheless still seek to tell their stories. In Justo Gonzales’s (1996) words—they represent a social historical experience common among many Hispanics in the U.S.—the experience of the *mestizaje* or exile, that is, the feeling “of belonging, yet not belonging” (14). In this state of displacement, compounded further with the wounds of street life, Hispanic lives only become more fragmented. Yet, despite this, to tell one’s story is to attempt to survive

¹⁰In my view, *testimonies on the margins* allow voices caught or once caught in the ravages of street life to tell their stories. The wounds of street life, existentially, can place one in a state of fragmentation and loss. However, by leveraging their testimonies, its religious content and its ability to reinterpret and reshape one’s sense of self, people find ways to begin to heal.

¹¹In a similar way to Paul Blankenship-Lai (2025), I view religion as a means to confront the “social wounds” of the streets. Exploring spirituality on the streets, Blankenship-Lai, who discusses social wounds in proximity to street life, uses a concept called “soul woundedness” to describe “a spiritual person whose life is being ravaged by a confluence of social wounds” (8). Centering the unhoused population, he adds: “It is an experience of being uprooted from oneself through violent social force and becoming existentially and then materially homelessness.” Yet, when people turn to spirituality on the streets, they discover “a last finger on the ledge of life. It is the pursuit of a presence that can help make a life worth living.” In short, amidst the ravages of street life, as people turn to spirituality or religion, they discover something that grounds and orients them.

and heal from such social-historical fragmentation.¹² In the example below, I read Manny's attempt to tell his testimony—piece by piece and wound after wound—as a constant attempt to reach for healing in a holistic sense.

“Testimonies of tears”—not limited to women—also involve multiple wounds, and echo the powerful stories of marginalized voices in less-institutional religious spaces who are able to transform their wounds of loss and suffering into channels of spiritual healing for others. As one involved in street ministries and less institutional forms of religion, Francine's conversion possesses miraculous accounts, but it is intermixed with a life deeply acquainted with street life, multiple wounds of loss, and non-institutional religious experience. Through the story of Francine, we are able to see how tears metaphorically underscore a level of “intimacy with God” that stands outside of the conventional conversion story, showing how God becomes proximate and personal in continual moments of human loss. Outside institutional religious narrative and spaces, tears become bridges to access divine presence and power (Orsi 2016). Francine's story reminds us how Latinx women in urban spaces like street ministries, transform their pain, and become key voices and players that foster spiritual healing in their communities.

In relation to both Manny and Francine, drawing from social-psychological literature, Robert Wuthnow reminds us how life stories and narratives function as ways for people to make sense of their own chaotic lives (65-66). He recalls the sort of emotional healing people undergo, as they recall the process of their lives “from negative (meaninglessness, isolation, despair) to positive (meaningfulness, acceptance, elation)” (66). Significantly, Wuthnow adds that through telling their life stories people experience an “improvement in . . . [their] sense of agency, through having made an empowering discovery about oneself or from being infused with divine power” (66). Thus, in this sense, testimonies on the margins are not about creating a coherent, sequence-based conversion narrative (Rambo 1993), but are more so about taking ownership of one's life in face of constant crises, telling

it in a way that is constructive for the speaker's spiritual experience, and in regard to this article, being healed from a convergence of social wounds.

In the face of the constant wounds, below, we will see how Manny's testimony pieces together a narrative that seems to be fragmented, yet demonstrates personal healing—spiritually and physically—amidst the dissemblance of street life in San Bernardino. Further, from a woman's perspective of street life, in Francine's testimony, we will see a life that transforms loss into gain again and again. Her tears brought her intimacy—thus a level of interaction (Rambo 1993)—with God long before her initial conversion, which overtime infused her with “divine power” and granted her a level of agency. This in turn brought further healing in the context of the transient streets of San Bernardino.

San Bernardino, the Streets & Narratives of Healing

As noted above, San Bernardino has been described as a city that has undergone urban decline during the twentieth century (Jones & Palmer 2000). Headlines in 2025 reported that San Bernardino was listed as the “dirtiest city” in the United States (Salem 2025). The public representation by the media of this city over the recent decades described it as a “broken city” full of urban problems. After the city filed for chapter 9 bankruptcy in 2012, the *LA Times* referred to it as a “distillation of urban woes in America” (Mozingo 2015). Again, to describe its recent history, some scholars have even characterized the city's modern decline as full of issues of “transience” (Jones & Palmer 2002).

Scholars have noted how the city's economic structure was altered when it lost “the big three,” that is, three major industries: Norton Air Force Base, Kaiser Steel, and the Santa Fe Railroad. With these closures, over 90,000 jobs were lost (Shafroth & Lawson, 2013). The more recent economic and social problems surrounding the city have only exacerbated these issues. San Bernardino has tried to make progress economically since its bankruptcy in 2012,

¹²Recalling the history of Hispanics in northern New Mexico, the dispossession of their land, and how Hispanics attempt to preserve their heritage through “cultural preservation and memorialization” in face of its erasure, Angela Garcia (2010) describes memory as “a kind of *survival strategy* against the increasing fragmentation of daily life” (95). In her study, she situated the traumas of heroin addiction within these social-historical struggles, underscoring how drug usage—like some sort of “life force”—was able to tend to a “broken heart” (202).

and just in 2022, a federal judge closed its bankruptcy case.¹³

In addition to solving its financial problems, the city has attempted to deal with the high levels of violence on the streets. As of now, the percentage of crime is at the lowest it has been in 25 years. It has dropped down by 25% across four major categories such as homicides, robberies, assaults and burglaries (Yarbrough 2026). Noting its national significance, in *The Sun*, Breau Yarbrough indicated: “In 2025, murders or homicides . . . were down 68% from 2020 in San Bernardino, compared to a 46% drop nationwide.” Furthermore, at the forefront of the city’s concerns in recent years was the significant rise of people living on the streets. In the same article, Breau Yarbrough stated: “According to the 2025 Point in Time Count, San Bernardino had the highest proportion of homeless residents of any community in the Inland Empire: 682 per 100,000 residents, compared to a county-wide average of 198 homeless people per 100,000 residents.”

The complex web of street issues seen in this city is not a pleasant sight. As I walked and volunteered with street ministries, I often saw several large and small encampments, and with time, the disappearance of the unhoused in different areas when they were forced out. On these transient streets, as one walked through them, one could feel a lingering sense of emptiness and uneasiness. When I visited the two street ministries mentioned above, people told me different stories about the streets: the gunshots that go off at night, the streets as unsafe and terribly scary, the gang wars that escalated in the 1990s, the drug scene, and the gang activities and lifestyles that even infiltrated people’s homes. Yet, amidst these chaotic stories,

some were able to share with me how they got off the streets, “got clean” and went back to the very same alleys and neighborhoods where their friends were to share the good news of the gospel.

In my study of people’s lives in this city, I took time to listen to their stories and testimonies. Street ministries operate in what Nancy Ammerman (2021) describes as interstitial spaces, or “settings [where] religious authorities and institutions of all kinds are weak, and lived religious practice, where it is present at all, is more individualized, diffuse, and fluid” (42). Outside of more structural elements of religion, it involves a level of “individual improvisation” (42). Yet, at times, it may still have institutional elements. Structural elements of religion are less defined in these spaces—yet this allows everyday stories to be given attention. Eloquent speakers and male leadership do not become the sole bearers of the Christian message, but rather, the voices and experiences of the laity, and especially women (which often can be overlooked), can be heard. Additionally, in these spaces, though interracial, the Latinx community is strongly present (especially in CCM), reflecting a dominant presence of Hispanic people in the city.¹⁴

While discussing the need to explore narratives in the study of lived-religion, Ammerman also explains how narratives can possess both institutional and interstitial dynamics, and appear in ways that are shaped by an “entangled social context” (184). This allows stories or testimonies to refer to authoritative religious ideas yet also to language that is more down-to-earth and in touch with their context and lived-experience.¹⁵ Ammerman specifies how “in interstitial contexts . . . stories may come from many sources, and the elements of explanatory stories must be pieced

¹³See the following article: Associate Press. “A decade later, San Bernardino’s bankruptcy case is finally closed.” *LA Times*. Published on September 13th, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-09-13/san-bernardino-bankruptcy-case-closed-decade-later>

¹⁴For example, in CCM, according to their main leader, the average number of attendees that come to receive food and clothing weekly are about 70 people. In my observation more than half of this number is made up of Hispanics.

¹⁵For example, some scholars have explored how some Latinx conversion narratives are deeply impacted by their social context and social milieu at large. Among Latinx individuals, a rupture from one’s “dysfunctional past” (120) has been reiterated by scholars like Jonathan Calvillo (2020). He notes how spiritual healing was often a “tipping point” for a definite “commitment to faith.” (121) While “definite points” in conversion narratives are significant, they are still just a part of the socialization experience of *how* one ought to tell a conversion narrative (122-123). As Calvillo states: “Converts construct and shape their narrative based on the ways in which they are socialized to discuss their personal experiences” (123). Yet, Calvillo would also underscore how conversion is often spurred by factors outside of the institutional sphere and context and by the social milieu at large (123-124). Indeed, there are still “tipping points” in narratives. Yet, told in non-institutional ways, that is, in fragmentary ways and in isolation from authoritative and institutional frameworks, such testimonies take on different shapes, while still holding relevance.

together” (184). In the process of weaving their own testimony, people may draw on scripture and “overarching cultural resources” in order to forge their own particular narratives (184-186). Entangling the streets and religion (Offutt 2023), these testimonies on the margins remind us of how people weave and tell their own unconventional and non-institutional stories from the margins in order to heal on their own terms.

Following Rambo’s process-based yet fluid orientation to conversion, we are reminded of how conversion narratives can fluctuate due to the interrelationships between culture, sociology, history, the individual person, and religion’s role in the process (8-12). While listening to their personal testimonies, I tried to note how my informants’ lived-religious experiences, testimonial accounts and details speak to the broader social, cultural and historical dynamics of their lives, noting the unorthodox tendencies of their testimony and the specific themes they drew upon.¹⁶ In my interpretation of their testimonies, these testimonies—in *content* and *structure*—work to heal the wounds of street life they have undergone and continue to face.

Manuel Ybarra - *Fragmented Testimonies*

“But the second time, the cop shot me. And that’s what saved me—the cop shot me.” Recalling many intense episodes that involved confrontation with the police, Manny told me how in one of these occurrences four bullets missed him, yet four others hit him. Full of wounds, the police did not take him to prison this time, but first to the hospital and then to a jail center where he had to wait a whole day to be released. Manny said, “I didn’t get out till three the next morning!” When the police let him out of jail he was confused. “I never got out of jail like that.”

Leaving a jail center off Etiwanda Avenue, Manny asked a man on the road, “Which way is San Bernardino?” The man responded, “Just go over that bridge and keep walking.” He walked for hours and hours and eventually the street became pitch dark. Difficult to see afar off, Manny heard footsteps as someone approached him. Greeted by a man headed in the opposite direction, Manny asked him, “Hey man, how much further to Valley Boulevard?” The

man told him he needed to turn back and that he had gone five to six miles in the wrong direction. Being rerouted, tired and lost, Manny headed back up the road. Here and there people stopped their cars and looked at him. He said, “But when they saw the blood all over me, they just [drove away]. There was a bunch of blood and stuff on my shirt. The cops had changed my shirt. They said, ‘We can’t let him go out like this. He’s full of blood.’” Manny expressed how the cops tried to hide the blood because they did not have any real charges against him, but they could not hide all of it. At the initial scene, “somebody just called [the police] and said they are fearful for their life and they came and shot me.” With a bloody shirt, Manny wandered down the street, as he had been accustomed to most of his life.

Backtracking in his story—which Manny did often—he recalled, “The first time when they [the police] got me was like [in] 1996 on 8th Street.” He returned back to the second encounter with an uncertain date: “The next time was in 2000 something, right here in my backyard.” While Manny was in his yard, holding tools and doing some mechanic work, he explained: “They knew I didn’t have no gun—nothing. And they came up—one had a 9 millimeter. The second time, it was with beanbags—a shotgun with beanbags in it. He shot me at point blank range—right in front of me. There was maybe one foot? He got me four times. And then they took me.” Often, when Manny described these encounters with the police and going in-and-out of jail, he would mix and confuse dates and jump to different encounters as though these memories were intermixed or merged. Similar to Brandes’ (2002) account of men sharing their *historiales* in AA meetings in Mexico, chronology is not so clear (83), but themes emerge (84) like “vicious cycles,” “police encounters,” “wounds,” “salvation” and most importantly “healing.” Manny’s mentioning of gun shots, “wounds,” and hospital visits also seemed to easily trigger other memories, causing him to conflate different moments of the past. Ironically, it was a gunshot he said that “saved” him. With this reading, it is as if a significant turning point was not at a church altar, but at the mercy of a violent gun wound.

At another point, Manny switched gears and began talking about his deliverance from drugs:

¹⁶In this article, I try to read Manuel and Francine’s testimonies in the context of their experiences with street life. While this involves understanding social and historical dynamics as suggested by Rambo, I try to not allow this to overshadow their voice, but privilege their voices as active agents in the construction of their own narratives.

Jesus, he did deliver me from heroin, and that was something I thought I'd never get off of. You're just into it so deep. And the money just keeps coming. The girls keep coming. The drugs keep coming. I thought I'd never get off of it. It's a hard life, bro. It really is, and I thank God that he delivered me from that. I really do. And I have no desire to return to it. I've been off of that heroin, dope since 2001. *January 17th, 2001*. So I'm going on 25 years.

Amidst these back and forth episodes, Manny is able to point to a specific and significant date. It seems to be a "sobriety date" or "clean date," which he was able to recall as clear as day. While that was the day he got off heroin, he would still struggle with using other drugs like methamphetamines. With multiple drugs to deal with, one "tipping point" only led to another. Rambo (1993) was correct to note how crises, as catalysts for conversion, can "vary in intensity, duration, and scope" (166). And, one can add, there can be multiple, culturally embedded crises. Nonetheless, woven within the "hard life" of drugs, glimmers of hope appeared and God is recalled as entering into the fabrics of street life, delivering him one drug at a time and eventually saving Manuel.

"I don't know how to share my testimony."

Pastor Jim Willard, the main leader of Hope City Church introduced me to Manny and his family. Jim explained that this family had experienced the toughest hardships in San Bernardino first hand. When I initially asked Manny if he could share his testimony with me, he surprisingly said, "Share my testimony? I don't know how to share my testimony." I gently responded to him that it does not need to be perfect. I just wanted to hear his story.

Manny is a native of San Bernardino, and was born and raised in the city. He also lived in other cities like Redlands, Colton, and Mentone, but mostly stayed around San Bernardino. But Manny did not begin his story with where he was born. As Manny sat across from me, he began to share about his life of selling

drugs, going in and out of jail, and getting shot multiple times. As noted above, some specific dates were hard to recall, many events were out of order, and memories merged with one another. While the order of events was hard to make out, one can still perceive that Manny underwent a real and significant change.

In my view, in agreement with Helena Hansen's (2018) points on testimony, *fragmented testimonies* attempt to piece together stories to generate "a sense of self." Street life is pervaded with realities of fragmentation, and as people are caught in *wounds of street life*, *wounds of erasure* are only exacerbated.¹⁷ Growing up in the context of street life, Manny's story underscores these points in poignant ways: not knowing his name, not knowing how to tell his story, endless cycles of street life, and the sense that his story goes in multiple directions. Yet, his testimony—though fragmented—registers God's involvement in the different, scattered moments of his life, and amidst such pieces, we see a life reconstructed with his own words. It is recalled as a life that becomes spiritually and physically healed.

A Fragmented Story

"My story just seems everywhere," said Manny as he tried to piece together different parts of his life.¹⁸ After the age of 13, Manny told me how he started to misbehave on the streets. He did not know why, but suggested that maybe it was because he did not know who his father was growing up. Around this age, he started getting involved with drugs, and in time he became a drug dealer and began to sell heroin.

It was normal that around his home, which was just two blocks away from Hope City Church, people carried guns and guarded the house while drugs were being sold. As I listened to him, in Manny's accounts there continued to be a tension between fragments and organization. On his nineteenth birthday, he recalled that he got busted for selling drugs and went to jail. He served some time, but this began a cycle of being incarcerated: going in and out, avoiding his parole officer and getting arrested again. He expressed that this happened "over and over, again and again." I

¹⁷In relation to how society treats people living on the streets, Paul Blankenship-Lai (2024) uses the phrase: "wound of rejection." In a slightly similar way, I am thinking in terms of how society at times stigmatizes people acquainted with the streets broadly (drug life, gang life, unhoused, etc.). In my view, *wounds of erasure* recall a state of personal and social fragmentation that historically dispossessed people undergo, along with the realities of street life that only aggravate such states of fragmentation.

¹⁸Interview with Manuel, October 20th, 2025.

asked him, “How many times?” He could not respond with a definite number. For twenty years of his life, until he was about 39, he kept going in and out of jail. He echoed phrases like “in and out” and “over an over” dozens of times as though it was an endless cycle.

This cycle went side by side with his own drug habit. Manny said: “I couldn’t get high enough bro. I tried just about everything.” Manny used various drugs and at times even in combination. “I’d go to the methodon, take my methodon, come home and slam. I was doing a speedball—cocaine.” Simultaneously selling drugs, he added: “And the money just kept coming in.” Yet, even amidst this lifestyle, Manny recalled to me that he still attended church here and there. In Rambo’s (1996) words, this would afford moments of “encounter” with advocates of religion.¹⁹ Because of his mother’s religious practice, he was exposed to Christianity at a young age.

Related to his family life, Manny said that he once had a wife and they had three kids together. Unfortunately, two of his kids passed away: “They lived about five months and then died. One from sudden infant death syndrome and the other one from crib death.” In time, he also split with his wife and divorced her. At the time, he did not want to lose her and prayed to God that he wouldn’t, but—referencing his drug addiction—he said, “The habit had me. Or I had the habit.” Eventually in 2000 or 2001, Manny said he got tired of his lifestyle and started to have feelings to turn himself in. In desperation he prayed for God to deliver him and said: “God took it away. God answered it and when he did it, I didn’t feel no pain . . . I didn’t even remember what the pain was. I don’t even remember kicking.” While he was trying to give up drugs, the cycle of “going back and forth, [and] back and forth” to jail only continued. Apparently, the police always had something on Manny, so it was easy for them to lock him up. During these cycles, he served multiple one year sentences.

Right before Manny decided to turn himself in, he and his mother went to have a meal together. Tired of street life, he said: “I just didn’t want to live like that anymore.” Drawing from the scripture that he learned at a young age, Manny recalled a pivotal moment of prayer. He said, I just prayed, “Lord, I want to see what

you got for me. Because he says *I know the plans I have for you*. . . . And then I remember not only that, he says *the rivers, they won't overflow you. You won't drown*.” Manny admitted that he doubted God and even several things in the Bible, but then explained: “The things that I had been reading throughout the years were coming to my mind.” Outside of the traditional church service, scriptures from his early childhood came to his remembrance while in the thick of street life.

While listening to Manny’s testimony, dates and details are complex, yet what we begin to see is a fragmented cycle and pieces of memories that interweave jail time, drug addictions, moments of desperate prayer to God, brief biblical passages, police raids and shootings. As mentioned in his opening story, Manny’s experiences of police raids and cop shootings were events that would be woven with ideas of *salvation*, blurring the before and after conversion moments. Religion and street life, unlike religion’s role in the “safe haven” thesis, become more “entangled” (Offutt 2023). Weaving God’s presence and salvation further into his experience on the streets, Manny recalled, “I’ve been shot three times in total: (1) one in my stomach and one of my arms; (2) my legs and one arm; and (3) the other one was just one arm. The Lord’s been with me. He’s been with me, going back and forth to the hospital.” In the midst of these hospital trips, medication doses, excessive bouts of drinking and—as we will see—rare health issues, Manny recalled God as present with him: “You know, he’s saved my life. Literally. Literally saved me. And some things, I couldn’t control.”

With these last comments, God is seen in the very margins of street life, not distant nor afar off, but with Manny as he went “back and forth,” in these endless cycles. In these details, as Rambo notes, the aspects of conversion narratives—like context, crises, encounter, interactions—are not that simple in this case, but indeed are complex and create cyclical, back-and-forth, unexpected and unconventional experiences. God is present in the bloodiest moments and endless cycles of drug addiction and street life; entangled in street life, Manny felt God’s presence during every hospital trip.

¹⁹Rambo (1996) writes: “The encounter stage brings people who are in crisis and searching for new options together with those who are seeking to provide the questions with a new orientation. Congruence of interests are not always found, however” (167).

“Something about those olives.”

It’s not always the authoritative or sound doctrines that cause people to have religious insight or to experience “something” that they deem as “special” or religious (Taves 2009). At times it is just the simple “objects, places, events and experiences” to which people ascribe religious, mystical or spiritual meaning (40). The outcome often produces, in Ammerman’s words above, moments where one’s personal and cultural understandings are fused with more authoritative doctrine.

At one point, amidst Manny’s cycles, he began to feel heavily sick and weak all the time. Specifically, he began to have pain in his jaw. He discovered that he actually had a tooth disease that was shooting poison into the rest of his body. When he received medical attention, they told him: “From one cavity, the poison is traveling to your teeth. You have a rare case. Your teeth are conjoined. You’re ingesting your own poison.” Manny added: “[Because of this] my stomach hurt. What do you call it? De-habilitating. I couldn’t stand up.” To numb the pain, Manny began to drink alcohol and became a heavy drinker.

Before he got medical treatment for the pain, he told me that he coincidentally learned about olives. At the time, he had a side hustle and was fixing cars. There was a man who brought an ice cream truck to Manny to receive some mechanic work. Manny was introduced to this man’s wife and learned that she purified olives. She explained to him: “I’ve been doing this since I was a little girl in my country. Olives always have to be washed all the time. Every day.” As Manny heard the story he said: “It sounded like salvation.” She went on: “They wash them in salt to take away the bitterness, to make them edible, so they can eat them.” As he listened to the women, it reminded him of the “forgiveness of sins. You got to keep doing that throughout your life as a Christian.” In his own way, Manny received a message—the cleaning of the bitterness of olives represents the cleaning and washing of the bitterness of sins from his life.

Struck by the woman’s story, Manny said he kept repeating to himself: “there is something about those

olives.” Prior to his days in Hope City, one day he was leaving a mega church in San Bernardino and he asked for prayer. He decided to go immediately to the hospital to get his teeth looked at. He recalled that as he walked on D and Olive Street, he noticed a little medical business trying to start up and take-off right at the intersection. A small little lady caught his attention as she was putting out a sign with balloons, which read: “We take Medical.” Manny explained: “And when I looked up, it was Olive Street. And the place on the corner was a dental place.” After explaining to the women his jaw pain and seeing if he was eligible for care, the woman invited him in. Manny recalled, “They started pulling out my teeth. And I started feeling better, better and better. They pulled five at a time. When they took out 10, I started feeling better. And then after that were root canals. They pulled the tooth, root canal, pulled the tooth, root canal, pulled the tooth, until like 19 teeth later.”

For Manny, this memory becomes a defining moment, which conflates physical and spiritual healing. The significance of Olive Street and the women’s story of purifying olives for him hinted at a moment of God intervening in his life. God led him to Olive Street, which reminded him of the spiritual significance that he personally connected with the cleansing of olives. Thus, this account was imbued with the experience of the forgiveness of sins, a cleansing away of bitterness from his life, and the healing from physical pain.²⁰ Despite stories appearing fragmented and unorthodox, Manny reached for a significant account directly from the streets that brought him spiritual cleansing and physical healing.

Francine - Testimonies of Tears

As noted above, Francine is a Latinx volunteer who serves frequently at CCM. Though she has just more recently gotten involved, her level of commitment is strong and she often serves as a co-facilitator with the main leader Gualbert Augustin. During my fieldwork at CCM, I noticed Francine leading in some shape or form, praying for people, or

²⁰In Christian thought, olives and olive oil signify the Holy Spirit. For example, *Gethsemane* means oil press. We know that this is where Jesus Christ prayed prior to His crucifixion on the cross—the garden of *Gethsemane*. With this reading, Christ was pressed at the cross to then release the oil, or the Holy Spirit. I mention this because I find Manuel’s reference to olives in direct connection to salvation fascinating; for him a street sign (Olive Street) and a story that he learned from a woman about cleansing olives during his street-life days—culminated in spiritual and physical experience of forgiveness and healing.

consoling people in a one-on-one and intimate way; her role primarily involves the latter.

Francine's testimony is one that centers the voices of women, especially in street ministries and urban churches.²¹ As one who serves in the community and not merely from the pulpit, Francine's story affords an opportunity to underscore a Latinx woman's first-hand experience of the divine, her own agency in constructing her own lived-religious experience, and her vital role in this street ministry.²² Divine experience, intimacy, and power is redirected, perceived and told from the perspective of a Latinx woman, and more, from one tending to the needs of the community and the streets of San Bernardino; Francine's testimony uniquely shows how divine encounters can precede direct conversion experiences, how divine power can be leveraged outside of traditional leadership roles, and how it can be used to tend to the wounds of others.

Further, on one hand, Francine's testimony of tears confronts the constant *wounds of loss* interrelated with street life, and echoes an unconventional conversion narrative of numerous crises, which in turn are transformed into sources of religious power and healing; on the other hand, her tears symbolically remind us of the value of intimate experiences in themselves. "Intimacy with God,"²³ embodied and expressed through tears, becomes an analytic in which to read Francine's possession of her own religious capital (Stark & Finke, 2000).

Passing Through Hard Times

Francine initially heard about the street ministry CCM through her connection with Gualbert Augustin (aka Gus), who at the time was also a hospice chaplain at the facility she was working in. Initially, Gus invited her, but Francine was never able to attend. However, once she decided to start volunteering, she shared: "Wow! I felt such joy to do something for other people, [the] less fortunate. Because I was in that position myself." Recalling her own past and experience of street life, Francine explained how she grew up in Los Angeles "in a very poor environment" and how she lost her family through drugs and alcohol. Both of her parents passed away due to the wounds of street life. "They committed suicide. So I've been through hard times," she recalled.

Despite these early *wounds of loss*, Francine looks at the present with a thankful perspective, glad that she is alive and able to help others in need who are living on the streets. Serving at CCM, she hopes that people would "just believe that God will help them." She described how at CCM they take in people living on the streets who come in "screaming and yelling." Yet, she says: "I have no fear whatsoever to speak to them." Francine's early life prior to her conversion was full of human loss, and as we will see below, she also experienced a moment of crises and divine interaction which involved "crying out to God" even before her

²¹Notably, Rambo (1996) early on noted the lack of study of women conversions. It is also surprising that while, for example, Hispanic Pentecostal street ministries are often dominated by women (Hansen 2018), the narratives that capture their role and importance are very limited. Hansen (2018) provides some useful insights as to why this might be the case: among street ministries in Puerto Rico (with specific drug related programs), while the *reformation* of *machismo* fits neatly with Pentecostal narratives, it is not so favorable toward the needs of women (114). In relation to these street ministries, Hansen further notes that women are given authority in public spaces when they frame that "authority in terms of their roles as mothers" (129). In my observation of street ministries, women have a key role in serving and supporting the community; their voices should be centered to understand their conversion and religious experiences in these contexts.

²²Following scholars like Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1996), who uses *lo cotidiano* or "liberative daily experiences" of Hispanic women (66) as a source of her *mujerista theology* as a way to capture "acts of subversion" against normative or absolute frameworks (i.e. "mainline theology") (72-73), in this article I draw on lived-religious Latinx experiences to counter dominant, singular narratives to carve out space for women's voices. This in turn gives voice and agency to Latinx women to define their own stories and role in urban churches.

²³Scholars like Tanya M. Luhrmann, would refer to this sort of intimate cultivated talk with God as "imagined dialogues," which in evangelicals experience is "the inner voice that comments, guides, interprets, and reflects, not always nicely—and works to make some of the dialogues both more real and more good" (131).

distinct conversion experience.²⁴ Amidst these numerous interactions with God during moments of tears and loss, Francine came to know God more—learning how to hear his voice.

“Please don’t let me die.”

With streams of tears, Francine began to recall a significant *crisis* in her life—an illness that prompted a *quest* for God and an *encounter* with a church (Rambo, 1996, 49-50, 166-170). She recalled that for a long time she had been “living in the world,” when suddenly she got sick and was diagnosed with cancer. She explained she had a large mass on her neck. After some time of seeking medical treatment, she began to get tired of the hospitals and the treatment of nurses. Eventually she cried out to God, and in tears prayed: “Please don’t let me die.”²⁵

After this desperate prayer, Francine began to attend a church. Someone told her about a specific church that was performing miraculous forms of healing. At first she was skeptical. She said she held more to her Catholic tradition and did not want to believe in miracles. Yet, she decided to at least visit. She explained that when, “I went to the church, these people were being healed and my eyes were in shock. It really scared me.” The preacher began to give an altar call, asking people to come to the pulpit. Francine said she did not want to go up and that her body was unable to move. Yet, through the persuasion of the preacher, she surrendered. “I remember falling to my knees and I said, ‘Okay, I surrender. If I give my life, Lord, do not let me die.’”²⁶

Having walked up to the altar, Francine said she had “fallen back” and it felt as though she was being choked. In hindsight, she realized and interpreted this moment as “a demonic source that was trying to come out” of her. After this “convulsion type” experience,

she said she felt relieved but still perplexed: “It was just weird because I saw the other people do it, but you think it’s fake. You don’t believe it until it happens to you.” After this altar encounter, while lying down on her bed at night Francine discovered that she was healed. She went back to the hospital and there was no mass on her neck. In relief, she exclaimed: “That is a miracle in itself to be healed by the Lord. And since then I gave him my life.”

Francine’s healing experience involved a radical, demon exorcizing “altar experience.” Uniquely, it is told from the perspective of a woman who experienced a physical healing that solidified her beliefs. Francine’s miraculous access to “divine healing” points to a specific and physical example, which in turn legitimizes and concretizes her religious experience. In a way, this recalls Elaine Peña’s (2011) ideas of “devotional capital” written upon the bodies of religious participants, yet here it was acquired not through labor, but through an act of surrender. Her first-hand experience with healing became a means of religious capital—that is, access to God—which only continued to develop.

The Voice of the Lord: Your Season is Over

On one hand, Francine discussed with me about her understanding of the Bible. She mentioned how prior to her divine healing, she felt she had little knowledge of it, “but now I have an understanding [of it] and now I listen and I follow the rules and I obey.” Through her regular reading of the scriptures, she “feels that the Lord is guiding [her] in so many different ways.” On the other hand, unlike direct encounters with the Bible or God’s word, one of the moments that shifted her life is when she experienced a divine calling through a direct voice. Due to embarrassment, some evangelicals may disavow

²⁴For Rambo, interaction is a stage in conversion that can develop much later, and involves *relationships, rituals, rhetoric* and *roles* (107-108). As we will see, in Francine’s account her experience of “crying out to God” and the rhetoric she used in her experience points to an intimate interaction even prior to her altar experience.

²⁵Interview with Francine, October 29th, 2025.

²⁶In both Manny and Francine’s stories, “surrendering,” giving in or giving up becomes a significant aspect of their conversion experience. The pressures of street life and illness led them to commit in unexpected ways. Lewis Rambo (1993) defines this as an “inner process of commitment,” and as “one of the most difficult aspects of conversion to understand” (132). He adds: “Surrender is an inner yielding of control, and acceptance of the authority of the leader, group, or tradition, which enables the convert to devote himself or herself completely to the group” (132).

hearing God's voice directly shortly after sharing they in fact heard his voice (Luhrman, 2012, 232-233), however, for Francine this did not apply. While sitting in her old office, she said that a day came when "I heard a voice say that *'Your season is over.'*" And there was nobody inside the office." She explained that this voice spoke these words to her more than once. In the process, she began to breathe very heavily, went to her boss and immediately quit her job. She interpreted the message as directions to leave her company, and later to begin serving God. Direct access to God's voice can be viewed as a privileged role and can be a means of religious capital. For God to speak directly to Francine, underscores a level of unorthodox religious experience, insight and power.

Yet, even prior to this moment, Francine was acquainted with God's voice, thus disrupting the linearity of conversion narratives, and creating precursive experiences particularly through early moments of crises. When she first encountered God's voice, Francine did not know it was him. Her sister had passed away at the age of 36 and left behind five children. Francine recalled, at the time, "I was so mad. I was so mad at God and I said, 'Why did you take my sister? You took my whole family, why did you take my sister?'" In frustration she went to the backyard of her house and cried out to God in prayer. As a form of ritual, Rambo (1993) describes prayer in the interaction stage, noting: for Christians, prayer fosters, "a sense of intimacy with a deity through the experience of talking with God, using either structured prayer or free-form, spontaneous prayer. Connecting with the creator of the universe in a personal, intimate way is a powerful experience for most converts" (118). Yet, even before her conversion, it was as though the wounds of loss forced Francine to reach for such raw, intimacy with God. She explained:

It was 5 o'clock in the morning and I was on my knees and I was yelling at *him* [God] and I said, 'Why did you do this to me?' I'll never forget I heard a man's [voice] like a deep *'get up'*. . . and then I heard it, and then I was just like still. I was kind of quiet because it kind of shocked me . . . like who's telling me that? It was 5 o'clock in the morning and nobody was out there. And there was just like a street light on and then it said it again. It

said *'get up.'* And then by the third time, he said, *'get up because you need to take care of your daughter,'* and my baby was only a year and a half. She was only my baby . . . Nina. She was young.

Francine explained to me that she felt like the voice could not be human and she was perplexed that it referred to her one and a half year old daughter, Nina. At the time Francine felt unable to go on and live. Crying, she recalled, "God probably knew that. So he really said that. I needed to live for my baby and now my baby's 21. That was the first time that I heard his voice, "Get up! Get up!"

Francine explained how in her life now, the same God continues to speak to her. In connection with her altar experience and significant turning point, it is as though the voice had long been present, appearing before, during and even after her conversion. "Things happen like that to me all the time. I hear his voice. He's very direct. I know I need to obey him now too. I don't play. I obey a lot." At times the voice asks her to go pray for someone. At first, Francine was resistant but because the voice insisted and pressed her she felt the need to follow it. With direct access to God's voice, she emphasizes how she is a person who intimately knows his voice and is in constant conversation with him: "I have a relationship with God. I speak in the Holy Spirit. He says that when you speak in the Holy Spirit, you're having a conversation. Nobody knows what you're saying. Nobody knows, but I know this one-on-one conversation." Gained through accumulated *wounds of loss* and tears, Francine's continued intimacy with God and access to God's divine voice allows her to obtain a level of religious power and agency in street ministries often limited to patriarchal leadership, religious authorities and institutions.²⁷

Healing on the Margins

At CCM, Francine is not on a podium giving a message, but she talks to people on a one-on-one basis, listens to them, speaks words of encouragement, and prays for them. Frequently, when I visit Celebrate Center Ministries, I see her speaking with people face to face and engaging them often with tears. Unlike a person giving sermons to others and remaining distant,

²⁷Some may argue that traditional conversion narratives possess dynamics like miracles, healing, hearing God's voice, visions, etc. Yet many of these can neglect the voices of women. Furthermore, this article explores how such dynamics interact with the context of street-life, and in turn problematize sequential patterns of conversions.

she enters into the community, listens to their struggles and shares spiritual encouragement.

Describing a specific encounter with a person she met at CCM, Francine said there was a woman who was waiting to receive a prayer from her. The woman was experiencing shoulder pain. Francine was assured that God is a healer and began to pray for her. But Francine also shared that behind the scenes she sensed something else was taking place:

Because of what I've experienced, I know now that there are demons. We are not aware of the things that hold us back—anger, unforgiveness, depression. All things that are not of God are demonic. Sorrow, depression, anxiety . . . I can go on and on and on. All those words are not of God. And that lady was carrying that. And I know because I've been around so many situations and I was watching people being killed by those things.

When Francine began to pray over her and placed her hand on her shoulder, the woman began to move her body as if she was throwing up. The woman shook back and forth, Francine said, "Because the demon doesn't want to come out." Francine then said that she spoke directly to the woman and the demon causing the pain, "'Cough.' And I said, 'Get out of her . . . today's the last day.'" Continuing to emphasize her access to spiritual power, in Francine's view, she is following what "Jesus told his disciples: to go out and heal." She recalled that the early disciples received a power from God to cast out demons, and she believed she received the same. "It wasn't them that were healing. It was the Spirit of God that they were blessed with and He gave them . . . the anointing power . . . This is called deliverance." For Francine, this "anointing power" to heal the community did not come through one dynamic encounter with God, but through *wounds of loss*, tears, numerous encounters with his voice, and constant conversation with God.

Through Francine, we are reminded of the ways in which women serve in communities in essential ways, and their experiences of tears that foster divine intimacy; despite long encounters with various wounds of loss, they transform such pain in order to be a factor of healing in their own communities.

Conclusion:

Testimonies on the margins of street life, in Latinx perspective, remind us of the overlooked narratives

that are being forged by ordinary voices. Often people who seemingly "do not know how to tell their testimony" or voices of women relegated to the sidelines can remain unheard and silenced. Yet some street ministries afford them a space to tell their story. While these Latinx testimonies from San Bernardino may appear in fragmented pieces or as unorthodox, they point to experiences familiar to people acquainted with street life. Conversion amidst street life is not linear, it's messy, cyclical, "back and forth," unorthodox and becomes redefined; it is filled with a multiplicity of wounds and crises. Yet, amidst the streets, "intimacy with God" is discovered and appropriated, especially by women who know his voice and divine power. In turn, fragmented testimonies and testimonies of tears reveal to us some of the lived religious experiences of people on the margins; and amidst such margins, often Latinx individuals are finding ways to navigate their social-historical conditions, which have been compounded with modern urban problems in inner cities. Street life can create its own wounds—*wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*; it can fragment identities and envelop them with mourning. Yet, despite this, individuals who tell their testimonies remind us that in the face of wounds they have reached for healing, and have brought healing to others.

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Appendix

Figures 1-6 (Latinx Churches on E Street)





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‘Will Not Those Who Have Ears, Hear?’: An Ethics of Care in Response to the Movement of the Holy Spirit

Micah Adkins

This article analyzes the implications of the Weberian concept of a prophet through a theological lens. The analysis extends to the influence of the Holy Spirit on the Christian experience, offering insight into the fruits of the Spirit as the core of Christian ethics. With the Holy Spirit as the ‘ultimate prophet,’ and the fruits of the Spirit as the fuel for virtuous Christian behavior, the Weberian prophet is described in the form of one highly driven and authentic person, a pastor of a church located in a rural village of southern Ohio. This individual, seeking to actualize the will of God in their social context, exemplifies Max Weber’s idea of a charismatic leader, a sort of ethical prophet in contemporary culture. In offering an ethnographic account of transcendent communication and prophetic influence within the life of the church, I also considered how the Holy Spirit serves as an actor in His own right, motivating spiritual growth, emotional maturity, and prophetic dialogue among the body of believers.

Introduction

Have you ever had your spiritual sincerity questioned? Has an individual ever challenged you to deep self-reflection, laying your ethical and moral values bare before you, forcing you to reconsider the deepest parts of yourself that may have heretofore been an untouched part of your worldview and psyche? These deep emotional and spiritual realities were presented to me, quite unexpectedly, by several interlocutors during my fieldwork at a Wesleyan church in rural Ohio. Social tensions, transcendent communication, and spiritual transformation became paramount topics in my ethnography, forcing me to delve, experientially and analytically, into transcendent awareness, self-growth, and other intangible elements of the human experience. I framed my research around Talal Asad’s methodology of looking “through the shadows” (2003, 16), attempting to study the moral and ethical lives of

God’s people without getting caught in the trap of overt discussions of Christian ethics. It quickly became clear, however, that while the voice of the Spirit may be soft, the individuals He employs to bring about spiritual growth can be quite the opposite.¹

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a large Christian church called Wesleyan Discipleship Church (sometimes referred to as “WDC”),² located in southern Ohio. My interlocutors were pastors, congregants, and members, past and present. Their worldviews, ages, social positioning, and cultural nuances were varied, offering an encompassing perspective on church life. Discipleship Church is part of the Wesleyan denomination, attributing high value to prayer, interpersonal connection, generosity, using their talents to serve, and authentic relationality. While this is an edifying mission for a body of believers to possess, these people would not be human if they didn’t have flaws, misconceptions, and the need for

¹Generous portions of this article are pulled from my thesis research, titled: “A Shared Ethics of Care: Dissemination and Development of the Holy Spirit’s Influence in the American Wesleyan Church.”

²A pseudonym. All locations and individuals are referred to by pseudonyms for anonymity.

continuous growth to adopt a greater level of godly characteristics.

As may be common in the trajectory of any church, congregants have endured trials and tribulations as church members, as well as times of renewal and growth. Instituted by significant social and religious unrest over time, this congregation has traversed seasons of uncertainty and loss in its recent history. Because of this, the Discipleship community has become receptive to ethical newness and moral growth. My research began at this turning point at WDC, “for such a time as this”;³ my insights are drawn from my informants’ separation from the old and embrace of the new.

The church, during this paradigm shift, has sought out new leadership and become receptive to a “fresh wave,” of spiritual growth, renewal, and revival in both the church and the surrounding community. All of this, while within the boundaries of a church’s general lifespan, holds a deeper meaning if one looks just behind the curtain—into the shadows (cf. Asad 2003). My goal is therefore to explore the shadows of one key figure who plays the Weberian role of a prophet, thus ascertaining the importance of Christian ethics. What if congregants utilized this time of challenge to consider their stagnant religious ideologies, engage in self-reflection, and delve into spiritual maturation? Maybe a higher power, through the presence of an interpersonal, divine Spirit, wishes to actualize a stronger practice of moral virtue within the life of the church? These are the inquiries I attempt to address, through the lens of a Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered perspective on ethics within the life of the church. I draw on both anthropological and theological sources to develop a deeper understanding of this transcendent-human interactivity, exploring how the Holy Spirit actualizes and sanctifies human souls for a unified, spiritually strong church (Adkins 2026).

The Power of Prophetic Influence

One primary actualization of growing in holiness and deeper intimacy with the Spirit was WDC’s decision to hire a young, vibrant, and energetic assistant pastor. I first met this individual prior to his hiring, and I quickly recognized his character to be a force of ethical change for the community (Weber 1999 [1922]). At the village coffee shop, the central

meeting place of our small town—Milk & Honey’s, regular worship nights were hosted. It was there that I encountered the church’s newest pastor. With the church’s worship team, their equipment, and a speaker filling one corner, everyone in the cozy coffee shop piled close, prepared to sing and pray together. I glanced around at the folks in attendance. Holding their caffeinated beverages in one hand and raising the other, many engaged in praise. There was one individual I had never seen before, someone who had just arrived in town, I supposed. His enthusiastic attitude inspired others, so full was he of charisma and authority. It seemed to help people feel more comfortable in worship when there was someone clapping more and singing louder than they were. It was almost as if this dynamic character had a unique divine connection—a powerful two-way relationship with God that superseded human judgment or hinderance. He began to call out “hallelujah’s” and stamp his feet. He sang with the rest, but his voice held a bit more passion, his handclapping louder, and his lead in for the next verse of a song apparent. His involvement drew followers, as more hands and voices rose in succession with his leadership.

I later learned his name was Dante Queens, and that he was the new assistant pastor at WDC. After this night of worship, Dante quickly became the talk of the village. Who is this guy? Where did he come from? I wrote in my notes that he brought fire; Holy-Spirit electricity that was felt by others, causing an effervescent-type energy to fill our small group. Even though few knew much about him, many were anticipatory of the “life” Dante could bring to the church; one informant said, in relation to Dante getting hired, “he would bring life, and we need life!” This person said they were anticipating the spiritual support of someone younger who would bring more passion, introduce fresh ideas, and help wage the war against religiosity. In practical spiritual application, this meant that Dante would (hopefully) counter a lukewarm Christian life and usher in authenticity; his strong personality would shed light on the areas of the church that needed deeper spiritual “fruit” (a Christian expression for the outpouring of a person’s inner heart posture/spiritual maturation). Dante’s confrontational character and desire for the Holy Spirit would help

³ Esther 4:14.

expose apathy⁴ in the body and the institution, which was a primary goal for the church (Adkins 2026).

As is becoming clear here, Dante is a dynamic and forceful character; a person who has shown up, made a statement, stayed, and significantly altered the order of the church. Anthropologically, if not always theologically, Dante inhabits the role of a prophet for the church community, initiating deep theological and ethical considerations, dredging up old ideologies, adding a fresh opinion, and insisting that the old order of things be re-thought. With the hiring of Dante and the changes he has brought, Wesleyan Discipleship is undergoing a season of revitalization through confrontation. A tension that seems too taut at times, this pressure nonetheless exemplifies the process of spiritual renewal. One church member expressed excitement for the new processes underway, almost like a revival, believing that the recent advancement of the church addresses what she referred to as “the spiritually dead church,” shaking up the church dynamic toward more authenticity and inclusion of all age groups in services, pushing for growth and connection, and challenging the politics that has run the church heretofore (Adkins 2026).

With this initial description of Dante’s character, I would like to compare his behaviors to Max Weber’s conceptualizations of a prophet. The concept of the prophet in anthropology is heavily influenced by the sociologist and philosopher Max Weber in his work, *The Sociology of Religion* (1991 [1922]). Weber begins this tome with consideration of human beings who act on behalf of their own interests as they understand them. In the case of Wesleyan Discipleship Church, their board was interested in greater congregational and spiritual growth, more movement of God in their local area, and modernized tech systems. Because of this, the church hired Dante Queens. He quickly became a force of religious and social change for the church, instituting a fresh approach to liturgical expressions and moral frameworks. Weber sees the prophet as an agent of breakthrough, instituting new cultural orders. This influence motivates socioreligious reflection and the implementation of religious ethics within the institution (Weber 1991 [1922], xxxiii).

The religious prophet, in Weber’s account, engages in ‘charismatic leadership,’ which I argue to be characteristic of Dante. Charisma is a powerful force

because through it the individual takes the responsibility for invoking a break in established norms and calls this break morally legitimate. It is considered a supernaturally ordained quality that provides a foundation for the leadership of a group of people. To legitimize his or her choice to deviate from social and institutional norms, the prophet must in turn invoke a source of moral authority, causing recipients to critically consider the conceptions of social meaning and religious order that they currently have (Weber 1991, xxxiv).

While all prophets derive authority from charisma, Weber describes a particular type of prophet who provides a model for a way of life, the “ethical prophet.” The ethical prophet imposes a certain demand on categories of people, insisting their precepts be followed. These precepts are not to exhort followers to emulate the prophet’s personalized example, but rather to exhort them to conform to an impersonally defined normative order. In the case of my project, this looks like transcendent ethics; ethical prodding that pushes humanity into reflection, saturating ordinary lives with deeper meaning and hidden values (Robbins 2016, 14). The reason ethical conformity is morally obligatory is due to the prophet’s conception of the nature of his or her mission. In the case of Dante, this involves the Holy Spirit leading the body into a new phase of spiritual growth. Dante perceives his push for change as justifiable because he believes his actions to be in line with the Spirit’s leading.

So, Weber’s ethical prophet believes himself or herself to be an instrument of divine will. He or she maintains a mission to promulgate an order for others; the ethical prophet legitimizes teachings by referencing a transcendental conception of divine authority. The ethical prophet has a “mission,” ordained by God, to teach, command, and generate new moral codes or social systems for followers (Weber 1991, xxxv). Prophets—biblical and Weberian—are active agents of change, typically challenging established authority. In legitimizing teachings, the ethical prophet derives a basis for authority through the power of charisma (*ibid.*).

The prophet’s authority comes from the transcendent God. Weber posits this divine authority as all-powerful and distant, expecting strict obedience to an ethical code that often disregards worldly

⁴Romans 12:11 (NIV): “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.”

concerns (ibid., xxxvi). Here we can draw a parallel to Dante's positionality in relation to the congregation. As will be shown throughout, he challenges the traditional order, expects congregants to adhere to his social and spiritual implementations in the church, and provides a new order for the body, based on the mission assigned by both transcendent and human leadership. This process toward growth and newness does not come without challenges, however. Deep-rooted social and moral changes do not occur without an ongoing tension between edification and frustration. One good example of this tension occurred about halfway through my fieldwork, within the first few months of Dante's hiring.

The Prophet in Practice

Picture this: two firecracker personalities arguing over church regulations, the influence of culture, and the logistics of dress codes, all while crammed together at a tiny restaurant booth, with multiple onlookers, in a small-town pizza joint. Sure enough, this is the situation I found myself in as I helplessly watched the fresh, young assistant pastor of WDC and an even younger church member spar over religious ethics. As is becoming clear, Dante holds no qualms about his own discomfort—and no qualms about making others uncomfortable either. Squished into a booth at Happy's Diner, Brooke, a valuable interlocutor and church member, teases Dante for the waitress already knowing his order. "I basically live across the street!," he defends himself, as the rest of us laugh. The lunch conversation carries tension and humor in equal measure, a balancing act that Dante manages masterfully. The table stays silent while Brooke and Dante dominate the dialogue. I feel like an itchy sock or a shirt collar that is just a little too tight—slightly out of place, mildly uncomfortable, and uncertain. The bickering continues, with Brooke typically interrupting Dante's monotonous responses to interject her point, leaving the rest of us unsure whether they are angry or simply bantering. Gertrude, another interlocutor and congregant, gives me a couple of questioning glances, until my brother Michael begins mediating the conversation.

Brooke is frustrated about the fact that Dante has come out with a stricter dress code for those who lead worship. He thinks clogs, the type of shoe that slip on but show your heel, are not appropriate. Trouble is, Brooke wears these shoes most of the time. Brooke quips, "what is this, a Dante tyranny?" He ignores this

slander, instead emphasizing that if he were under the authority of someone else, he would follow their rules. The implication is clear: he expects WDC congregants to respect his position as assistant pastor and the changes he is making.

This terse approach is characteristic of a Weberian prophet; Dante views himself as an instrument commissioned by God to preach divine commandments and ethical duties. In his perception, he is enacting an ethical standard of strict attire for worship, viewing clothing choices as reflective of modesty and respect—thus setting a standard for the congregation, as well as aligning the church with what he (Dante) believes is an appropriate and God-centered manner of conducting oneself. Dante believes his ability to hear God is legitimate and thus should be adhered to. This sort of prophet demands obedience and radical social reorientation to honor God. Obedience becomes an ethical duty ordained by God and enacted by the ethical prophet. Weber linked this concept closely to the example of the ancient Israelite prophets, showing a connection between how a biblical and socio-anthropological prophet approach ethics (Weber 1991, 60).

Wesleyan Discipleship went from a church where worship leaders wore shorts and sandals, to meeting Dante's expectation of long dresses/skirts, pants, and closed shoes. He explained to us that it seemed against church culture, to him, to worship the Lord in "house shoes." He did not view this attire as respectful enough for leading others in worship to the Creator. Dante pointed back to God for these convictions and argued that it matters for those who are representing Christ to match a high standard of physical presentation—one which aligns with the specific requirements he maintains in leading worship.

After this point was clear, Brooke and Dante moved on to discussing the key she would sing in on the following Sunday; Dante offered words of affirmation about Brooke's vocal abilities and yet challenged her to sing in a higher key. She hesitated, but Dante asked that they meet in the middle; Brooke agreed to sing a key higher than she wanted but a key lower than he wanted. The tension evaporated—the rest of lunch went smoothly.

By way of a brief summary, Dante's presentation reflects Weber's ethical prophet (1999) through a series of propositions. The authority and knowledge a Weberian prophet possess stems from the divine, rather than an institutional force. Absolute obedience to ethical principles is demanded, often

uncompromisingly. That new standard is revolutionary, challenging established social or religious structures—often revealing a new divine directive. Dante maintains an attitude of assurance behind ethical standards, which both frustrates its recipients and yet fuels respect for Dante’s spiritual fervor. While his confidence to step on people’s toes may be frustrating, Dante possesses a divine connection that incurs curiosity and uncertainty in others—motivating listeners to engage in spiritual introspection. Dante was, and is, not without his antagonists; but anger, too, is a kind of devotion.

Dante’s confrontive nature demands a response. Dante considers his personal understanding of the order of things to be in communion with the spiritual authority granted to him, and in order with his ‘right’ relationship with God. This perspective thus informs and approves the ethical changes he pushes for. In this same way, as a prophetic figure, Dante has become the point of intersection where the history of the church and its traditions converge with the future of the church. The prophet is both a product of his time and the primary agent of change within it. Prophets absorb tradition, interpret its meaning, and then project that understanding onward, actively shaping the social environment around them (Sarró 2023, 481).

The vignette above exemplifies Dante’s unexpected and unpredictable nature. One moment all is in jest, and the next is filled with theological debate. Riding on a psychological and religious rollercoaster, Dante personifies a figure who challenges the status quo, encourages congregants to consider principles they may not have questioned heretofore, and makes us wonder, “what does a Christian’s ethics really look like?”

This unexpected and suddenly pervasive assistant pastor is a figure who came to dominate my field notes as he came to dominate the communal life of WDC. With his defiance of norms, his charisma, his claims to spiritual power and presence—Dante is, at least in Weberian terms, a prophet for Wesleyan Discipleship Church. In this pivotal role, Dante helps reveal a key theme underlying my research: the presence and (out)working of the Holy Spirit. Who is to say whether

the Spirit approves of clogs or ballcaps in a worship service? Is it possible to balance the tension between respecting tradition, adhering to institutional norms, and Holy Spirit-led fluidity in church? It is a messy, layered mix of institutional teaching and expectation, interpersonal relationships, conflicts, and, somewhere in there (we think, we hope), the work of the Spirit. In this church’s pursuit of ethical living, contestations of the Spirit became the thread tying everything together.

From a Christian perspective, all these changes and challenging social dynamics are the testament of a paradigm shift on a religious scale—a change of thinking—adding new assumptions while discarding others. Jesus, from a biblical perspective, calls this “making all things new.”⁵ We see this same idea of a paradigm shift here with Dante; what seems immutable becomes subject to change (or becomes discontinuous, to reference Robbins 2007). Uncertainty ushers in rebirth. “It is the natural progression of reality from dissonance to resonance, of humanity growing towards its destiny, of growing ever more profound in the truth rather than just changing directions” (“The Center” 2024, para. 3).

It is necessary, then, for the prophet to concordantly actualize the fruits of the Spirit and motivate church members to do the same. By knowing the Spirit and walking in His attributes, believers become more naturally receptive to God’s ethical standard—and they more willingly embody virtuous living. This is where knowing the truth of God and walking in it enables believers to live a life of congruence in the church. This openness to the discontinuity that the divine may cause in a person/institution’s lifespan allows Christians to experience personal refreshment from God and receive supernatural insight⁶—when believers work in conjunction with the Spirit for greater spiritual maturity.

Aside from social relations and personal spiritual application, this process of tension and moral introspection builds upon itself in the primary way Dante leads the church—through worship. Dante presents a different type of theological engagement for WDC attendees. He interacts and engages with the

⁵Revelation 21:5 (ESV).

⁶Proverbs 3:7-8: “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD [with reverent awe and obedience] and turn [entirely] away from evil. It will be health to your body [your marrow, your nerves, your sinews, your muscles—all your inner parts] And refreshment (physical well-being) to your bones” (AMP); Proverbs 9:10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (NIV).

Spirit in worship in a way that has ushered in a new implicit theology—forcing the congregation to engage in reflection of their own understanding of the divine (Percy 2018).

The timbre of worship has altered at WDC because of Dante, which has shifted the overall emotional atmosphere of the community. Dante's prayers have brought a different grammar to the worship experience. He always petitions God during worship and prayer, asking that He will enjoy the worship more than we do; Dante keeps the focus on God—continuously stating in his prayers that our worship and the service is for Christ alone. Dante keeps a balanced flow between energetic praise and reverence with quiet emotion. He encourages congregants to interact with God this way—personally and collectively, with passion, joy, and somber awe. Dante uses liturgical forms to collectively motivate congregants to adhere to a biblical ethical code—centering members on the love of Jesus and encouraging the church to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit—producing a devoted heart posture. Dante therefore creates a space for corporate worship to be engaging, involved, personal, and collective—all within the flow of a single worship set.

The time of worship is collective, but I deliberately place Dante at the center of the action because he is the driving force for change at the church. And yet, bearing all the charm and charisma of Weber's archetypal prophet, I hesitate to reduce Dante to a factor of charisma or rupture. In one regard, at least, my assessment of the role of the prophet at Wesleyan Discipleship Church differs from Weber's account. Weber asserts that this revolutionary form of command will dwindle upon the initiator's absence, morphing into institutional regulations instead (1991, xxxiii-xxxiv). In contrast, however, the church has the potential for a different outcome. It seems that Dante's spiritual push may indeed provide lasting change, in part because his position is supported by the main pastor, Jake Fadeley, who said in an interview, "I thought it would be a good opportunity to [hire Dante,] who is Spirit led, Spirit empowered, and [let him] lead as an example to people here about what that looks like." Wesleyan Discipleship also has expressed openness to undergird Dante's mission. In relation to Dante's leadership, one board member stated, "I think our culture *should* be shocked." In the meantime, however, Dante's authority is still fresh, and the community is still in the throes of following a leader who challenges existing social orders.

Prophetic vs. Priestly Influence

It is necessary here to briefly expand on Weber's account of prophetic and priestly influence on the people of God. As previously mentioned, prophets utilize charismatic authority to instigate change; in contrast, Weber characterizes the priest as exercising institutional, bureaucratic authority to maintain stability (Weber 1991, 60). Normally, prophetic insight dwindles into institutional regulations, altering social dynamics from newness, challenge, and self-reflection to a more stabilized, 'conservative' way of ordering a body of believers. While prophets bring a more 'radical,' conflictual, and ethical-based social mode, priests typically operate as professionals within a permanent institution. While I am not seeking to challenge Weber's dichotomy of these two types of prophets, I do believe there is a way to merge them, resulting in a more Spirit-led, ethics-focused, and stabilized Christian understanding of the role of the prophet.

Thus far I have primarily focused on Weber's ethical prophet, arguing against the idea that Dante's prophetic movement will simply dwindle away upon the initiator's absence. Both church leadership and congregants support Dante's leadership; because of this ongoing respect for his authority, as well as his permanent residence at the church, it is likely that his spiritually geared, more 'deviant' influence on church life will continue. Dante has pushed from the very beginning of his time with the community for growth in the church. He has confronted social norms, ideologies, practices, and beliefs that he saw as outdated and spiritually hindering. The church has since become more multigenerational and interpersonal in its social dynamics, and intentionally relational among its members. These factors point to the possibility that by following the ultimate facilitator of ethics, the Holy Spirit, Christian ethics and transcendent communication among a body of believers could grow to encompass large groups of people who hear the Lord, live in tune with Him, and give divine messages to one another—rather than being confined to the influence of one prophetic individual.

Dante himself maintains a different view on the prophetic trajectory than the Weberian ideal. He holds a strong view on transcendent communication for believers, asserting that *all* Christians should hear the voice of the Lord and transmit His messages. In a phone conversation, I asked Dante if he considered himself to be a person who passes on messages from

God. He affirmed, with conviction, that this spiritual practice was crucial. Biblical knowledge and relational connection with God are paramount to correctly interpret and convey God's messages with wisdom.⁷

Building on the Aquinian idea of prophecy, including the interpretation of God's will to contemporaries, Dante's ideology is supported by John Calvin's take on the matter:

In the early modern period, humanists from various theological allegiances . . . articulated the position that prophecy is interpretation of Scripture. The magisterial reformers agreed that the core of prophecy was the interpretative more than the predictive gift . . . [some believe] prophets are not those who produce new doctrinal revelation, but rather those who rightly expound Scripture and proclaim the word of God, who . . . call for repentance and renewal of the church. (Pak 2018, 489)

Dante adopts this position. He is one who has rendered an *interpretation* of God's voice and Word, feeling compelled to proclaim it—he has done this in church, interpersonal settings, interviews, and over social media.

To mediate these diverging images of prophecy, I follow Ramon Sarró, who argues that prophecy may be less about foretelling the future as was done through the Israelite prophets in the Old Testament and more about diagnosing contradictory situations in the present (2023, 472). Abraham Heschel suggests something similar in his book *The Prophets* (1969), which centers on the divine pathos of biblical Hebrew prophets. Heschel offers a blend of the biblical and Weberian ideas of prophetic action; rather than just predictors of the future, prophets are individuals who experience and portray God's intimate concern for the moral state of society. They push for righteous governance and provide hope. Yet Heschel describes prophets as some of the most unsettling characters, challenging the larger status quo of a people and/or institution. "The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind" (ibid, 12).

One interlocutor of mine pinpointed these exact qualities of Dante. She acknowledged his conflictual presence yet also highlighted his heart for Christ and his willingness to work alongside others for the greater good of the church. Herein is the idea that a prophet, ordained by God and (hopefully) led by the Spirit, enacts greater spiritual growth in the church through confrontational, mildly aggressive, mechanisms. And yet, behind these off-putting behaviors are individuals who desire to see the will of God enacted in the body and are willing to be the forces of change that help make that happen. What might be the outcome of this charismatic, unsettling, mildly frustrating pastor in the life of the church? Or the deeper reason for Dante's push for ethical re-ordering? To address these questions, let us consider the concept of transcendent communication.

Transcendent Communication

As my research grew and the Holy Spirit became a central theme in my fieldwork notes, the idea of Dante as a prophet became increasingly prevalent. I was fascinated with the theological and anthropological implications of the concept of the prophet for explaining what Dante has brought to the community. One day I asked him, in an informal conversation, how he hears God and how he believes the people of God can or should transmit messages from the Lord. He replied that God speaks through Scripture, people, and believers' thoughts.

"That's where we have to know how to test if it's our mind or God" he told me. Dante included the importance of mental renewal,⁸ so Christians can be assured that they have heard the voice of the Lord. With a ready heart and an open mind to Christ, the Spirit can work on the individual, growing them in the faith and steeping them in truth, allowing the transformation of the mind to take place. Beyond salvation, ongoing spiritual growth matures a person until they become refined, reflecting their Creator, with a mind that is set on things above, centered on righteousness, and dead to the flesh, instead focused

⁷"Study *and* do your best to present yourself to God approved, a workman [tested by trial] who has no reason to be ashamed, accurately handling *and* skillfully teaching the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15 AMP).

⁸Romans 12:2

on building the Kingdom.⁹ This spiritual growth encompasses what ethical living looks like for the life of a Christian; it is only achieved through intentional time spent with the Spirit, and openness to the inner reflection and growth that is required in the process of sanctification. This process not only involves transcendent communication but develops and matures through the fruits of the Spirit.

Alongside this process of trust, growth and change, Dante articulated his desire that *all* Christians be able to clearly hear the voice of the Lord. During an interview with this prophetic pastor, I asked Dante if he considered himself to be a person who passes on messages from God. He said he believed, strongly, that he should indeed be practicing this. I then inquired if this was a personal conviction, to convey God's will to others. He countered this notion, stating that all Christians should engage in this level of spiritual insight and articulation. Through the process of discernment to hear God and communicate messages, Dante believes that God uses human observations and experiences to prepare the individual. This is an example of direct relationship with the supernatural and two-way involvement in transcendent communication. An individual seeks after God, hears from Him, considers how their existential experiences have developed spiritual maturation and wisdom through the Spirit's oversight, and then shares this growth the Spirit has nurtured with others, to aid in making disciples and edifying the Church (Adkins 2026).

This conversation from Dante answered a question I had had previously in my research, namely: is "prophetic insight" (i.e., hearing God and proclaiming His Word) a spiritual practice open to all Christians? Listening to the voice of the Spirit comes with attentive time spent in prayer, Scripture reading, separating one's life from sin, purifying one's inner soul,¹⁰ and developing discernment, which equips a Christian to hold the spiritual weight of accurately and effectively conveying divine-sent messages with truth

and tact.¹¹ According to one who has been used by the Spirit to bring about change for his assigned church, this means that *all* Christians *can* and *should* serve as an intermediary between the supernatural realm and humanity.¹²

It can be further argued that, rather than Dante's prophetic influence dwindling into bureaucratic authority, the status quo could continue to be challenged through congregants themselves, if they were to adopt and actualize Dante's example of transcendent communication and an interpersonal relationship with the divine. This would create an entire congregation of people who act on the spiritual gifting of prophecy, where prophetic insight and influence merge into the daily lives of the body of believers. In this way, the people of God are *all* in tune with the Spirit, listening for "words from the Lord" and transmitting these messages in a way that is edifying to the Church. Thus, prophecy does not diminish, but expands into a plethora of Spirit-led individuals, who present truth in a manner that is structured and yet authentic (cf. Percy 2018).

The Holy Spirit as an Ethical Actor

In much the same overwhelming way that I encountered Dante, the Holy Spirit met me with the same, if not greater, intensity, forcing a consideration of His influence to the forefront. Myself a Christian, I committed my research to God—and the Spirit began to open my eyes to His work behind the scenes. Through conversations with informants, participant observation, and the gift from my interlocutors of a deeper understanding of biblical wisdom, I came to understand that the Spirit is the force behind the ethical realities I was witnessing. The Spirit was revered by congregants at WDC; my interviewees pointed to His prevailing will in the new things occurring at the church; including Dante's hiring, Pastor Jake's

⁹2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT): "So all of us . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit;" Galatians 2:10 (ESV): "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

¹⁰James 4:8: "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded."

¹¹Ephesians 4:15

¹²Jeremiah 1:7: "for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak."

motivation for change, and a renewed attitude among church members.

I can testify first-hand to this transformative influence of the Spirit at WDC, as well as how He guides those who live in accordance with Him. For example, when I began my research, I focused heavily on the liturgical aspects of religious life, and how the church's spiritual practices represent scriptural-based ethics. What I was unknowingly missing, however, was consideration of the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit himself as the source of ethical insight. Through prayer, reflection, contemplation, and a thorough study of my fieldwork notes, I understood what my research was missing—attention to the One who initiated the moral, social, and liturgical elements I was studying—the Holy Spirit.

In gearing my inquiries toward the Spirit, my research opened into a new realm of spiritual, and indeed social, realities. I noted informants' attitudes, behaviors, and expressions of worship. Those who were gentler in demeanor, humble, and servant-oriented attributed their meekness of character to the Creator. Likewise, those gifted in music and speech, and others who imbued graciousness, all mentioned their desire to align with Christ's character. Interlocutors who exhibited the fruits of the Spirit talked about the presence of the Holy Spirit, although few specifically mentioned the fruits directly. Of course, in seeking after the heart of God, this growth occurs naturally.¹³ As such, with increased time spent at WDC, I came to understand that those who live in tune with the Spirit emulate a deeper level of virtuous living than individuals who are less conscious of the fruit of their heart posture and behaviors.¹⁴ Each Christian maintains an ethical responsibility before God; will believers fulfill this call to be biblically learned and personally transformed by the Spirit? And how committed are the people of God to live out this kenotic love?

My justification for talking about a Spirit-led human reality from an ethical standpoint is quite simple—I have witnessed and can attest to the transformative power of a relationship with God; those who invite the Holy Spirit to flow through them emit a

lasting peace, joy, and humility that those without transcendent influence do not experience so freely. The Holy Spirit flows through believers, dwelling in them to renew them, to replace worldly desires with godly ones through the study of Scripture and prayer; with this comes the hope of a perfected church.¹⁵ This process of sanctification shifts perspectives to align with God's will, enabling the fruits of the Spirit to replace carnal behaviors (Tarrants 2016).

Now, I understand that the transcendent experience is hard to explain—larger than humanity yet expressed through our human souls. How to properly articulate a divine encounter? How to know when the Spirit is speaking, and when/how to obey? From my experience, most, if not all believers, question if we hear God at times. It is pushing yourself out there to know if we have discerned God's voice correctly, and to ensure that we follow His will as He intends. The experience—and challenge—of transcendent communication can be illustrated by an event that occurred during my fieldwork, when I participated in a spiritual practice called intercession—facilitated by humans but guided by the Spirit.

On a rather warm September day, my friend Jane and I drove up to the nearby city of Crete's college campus, where Brooke had set up a spot for those who wanted to intercede for the upcoming Liberation Night, an organized time of prayer, sermons, and worship orchestrated by all the college ministries. We parked on campus, passed the college chapel where our friend Magnolia was married last year, and saw Brooke sitting with a few other members of WDC on a stoop in front of a large portico with columns. Upon our arrival, everyone sat down on the steps and Brooke asked that we huddle and pray.

Brooke suggested that we take time to hear what God might say we needed to pray about for Liberation Night. All of us present "heard" something as impressions in our minds; I heard "spirit of fear." This spirit could be affecting my participation as a prayer person, the other leaders of Liberation Night, and those who may come to hear the Good News. Another church member heard the name "Peter," who we all petitioned together would encounter the Spirit on this

¹³Hebrews 11:6; Jeremiah 29:14

¹⁴Matthew 7:16: "By their fruit you will recognize them" (NIV).

¹⁵Ephesians 5:27 (ESV): "that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

upcoming night. Someone else was impressed with the idea that Crete and its college should become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Crete is known by the Christian community for its connections with the occult. We each shared what we had heard with one another and discussed the possible interpretations of these messages. Through our conversation, we helped one another discern what the Lord was saying. For example, we had prayed God would speak about who or what needed intercession, so we considered the possibility that the name “Peter” might be someone who would be present and would hopefully encounter the Lord. We thus leaned on one another as ‘counselors’¹⁶ who offered spiritual discernment for the things we heard.

Here we see a powerful example of Christians girding each other up in the faith but also connecting with the Spirit on an individual level. This fulfills the biblical ethical mandate of representing Christ’s body as a unified whole, while also stepping into individual gifts/words from the Lord.¹⁷ As mentioned, Dante said to me that he thought all Christians were called to proclaim messages from the Lord. Precisely the qualities that I had identified in him as prophet-like. But was that not what was happening here? Could a body of believers, not just an individual, act in a prophetic capacity? A bold claim, certainly. But I think my informants would agree that during this prayer session, they heard God, strove to transmit His message(s), and interceded for the upcoming Liberation Night. The Holy Spirit surely worked through the shadows of this gathering; He guided our hearts and minds for the function, purpose, and posture of the worship night.

This ethnographic example sheds light on the reality of the Spirit of God as an ethical actor. Not only

does the Spirit guide virtuous living and inner transformation, but He also embodies the concept of an ‘ultimate prophet.’ As the facilitator and supplier of prophetic insight, spiritual challenge, and moral growth, the Spirit serves as a prophetic force that is unmoved by bureaucratic guidelines and institutional regulations, instead breaking up the status quo and encouraging believers to engage in divine-led acts of social deviance—for the sake of ethical strengthening and the fulfillment of scriptural righteousness. It is truly the Spirit, then, who is utilizing His people to call attention to social barriers, strengthen spiritual maturity, and create more effective witnesses.

Within this dynamic interplay between the body of believers and the prophet, the Holy Spirit acts as the crux. Working through the shadows, the Spirit is the glue that allows these social and religious forces to dwell together. Spiritual gifting, edification, and care for one another are dependent on the work of the Spirit within a willing body.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is the sanctifying force within the church, forming believers into the body of Christ. To do this, the Spirit distributes diverse spiritual gifts, as well as matured character traits, for the purpose of communal edification, facilitating worship, and producing fruit that reflects Christ. The Holy Spirit is the crucial element for transforming a group of individuals into a flourishing, unified community (Tarrants 2016). The Spirit is the “spirit of prophecy,” essential for revealing moral truth. As the *ultimate* prophet, the Spirit reminds believers of Jesus’ teachings and provides wisdom on how to interpret spiritual and ethical realities.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit motivates and influences prophetic knowledge. He feeds prophetic insight into a church by empowering believers to

¹⁶Proverbs 24:6 (NKJV): “For by wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety.”

¹⁷“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body . . . God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27 ESV).

¹⁸Galatians 5:16, 25 (NLT/ESV): “So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit;” Romans 8:14 (ESV): “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God;” 2 Corinthians 3:17 (TPT): “Now, the ‘Lord’ I’m referring to is the Holy Spirit, and wherever he is Lord, there is freedom.”

discern God's voice and direction, often delivering messages through inspiration, Scripture, and spiritual gifts. He acts as the source of revelation, interpreting God's heart, and He leads the church. This supernatural wisdom guides larger decision making and aligns the body of believers with Jesus' lived example in the gospels. The Holy Spirit acts as the "Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation," enabling God's people to operate in the tangible realm with supernatural insight (Tarrant 2016).

The Fruits of the Spirit

The Spirit thus actualizes His fruits in the church and through prophetic influence. God's people, however, must allow themselves to be led by the Spirit.¹⁹ While an individual may not always vocalize how the Spirit leads their life, it is through the fruits of their behaviors that the Spirit's ethical mandate is articulated. Transcendent influence speaks *through* the individual, flowing through their minds, expressions, and actions. The Church must continuously yield itself to the desires of the Spirit, whose leadership is always diametrically opposed to the desires of the flesh. This is where Dante's position is impactful—he has encouraged WDC to engage with the fruits of the Spirit, sometimes in ways even he might not anticipate. Though Dante is human and can make mistakes, church members must practice patience if they feel tried by him, kindness/goodness in embracing his new position at the church, love by welcoming a new brother in the body, and self-control in mitigating one's own opinions on his new changes—instead submitting to his charismatic authority.²⁰ The fruits of the Spirit therefore evoke wholehearted, worshipful surrender and obedience in one's heart and life; this produces a kenotic love that is rooted in honoring our neighbor's best interest and highest good (Tarrant 2016).

To include an ethnographic vignette of this lived faith in action, through the active presence of the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of believers, I describe here an interview I had with a married couple, devoted attendees of Wesleyan Discipleship—Danielle and

Trevor. We met at Tommy's BBQ, a local hole in the wall, for an informal conversation about the logistics of a Spirit-led life. When the waitress brought Trevor's chicken salad and Danielle and my sandwiches, Trevor looked at her and asked, with eyes full of understanding and interest, if there was anything he could pray for her for. I quickly learned from this couple that they value intentional interpersonal connection and encourage a gentle and effective witness. "It's important to keep at the forefront that we're doing this for God, not man," Trevor stated. Danielle agreed, "it's all about the heart for us;" this couple exemplifies what an ethics of care looks like when it's truly embodied. They heavily prioritize *living out* their faith by putting the Bible's commands into practice. Their heart for the church, for outreach, for care, does not stem from institutionalized rules or influence from others—their personal relationship with God has transformed their hearts and changed their behaviors.

It is becoming increasingly clear that care and connection, actualized through the leadership of the Holy Spirit, is what unifies believers, encouraging inner transformation for church members to become more Christ-like. This is how the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control are actualized. It is a lived example of faith that provides a basis for Wesleyan Discipleship's moral order—a shared social energy that accompanies a sense of belonging among believers. This effervescent-type reality (cf. Durkheim 1912) continuously shapes everyday moral thoughts and behaviors through supernatural encounters. Ethical desire thus becomes intertwined with the One who created humankind in His image, making moral maturity and spiritual discernment reliant on transcendent awareness and communication. As Joel Robbins describes in his discussion of transcendent positioning within the anthropology of ethics, "It is that the sometimes insistent but often rather more gentle ethical desires various values set in play in the everyday that tip us into reflection . . . Ultimately, these desires and the moral energies they produce have their roots in the . . . face of transcendence" (Robbins 2016, 14).

¹⁹Galatians 5:18

²⁰Hebrews 13:17 (ESV): "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you;" 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NIV): "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

At Wesleyan Discipleship, it has become clear that an embodied exemplification of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life and heart is the church's 'ethics in the shadows.' This is expressed in daily acts of interrelational care, communication, and connection—with Christ and with one another. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45 ESV).

Thus, if Christians are aligning their lives with the Spirit, their relationship with Christ, others, and self culminates in an ethical balance that generates deep care for God through service and love toward others. Individual Christians must measure up their behaviors with the Word of God and reflect on the edification of the church in their spiritual walk. This places significant responsibility on each believer to live in step with the Spirit, practice spiritual/emotional maturation, obey God's commandments to the fullest,²¹ and strive to live a life of holiness unto the Lord.²² In living day-in and day-out this way, individuals can effectively be in tune with the Spirit and convey His words to others (Adkins 2026).

In summing up the importance of knowing the Spirit and communicating with the body of believers in a manner that glorifies Jesus, Ephesians 4:11-12 teaches that Christ gifted the church with leaders. These apostles, *prophets*, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are meant to equip *all* believers for works of service "so that the body may be built up" (v. 12). The goal is for church members to strengthen one another toward maturity.²³ Once, when I asked Dante what the pastoral role meant to him, he told me, "The pastor exists to equip the saints for the work of ministry." He cited Ephesians 4, looked up the chapter, and read portions to me. "The Christians are the ones in ministry. I don't do ministry, I'm not in ministry," he stated, tapping his fingers on the table, "I train for ministry. Big difference."

Pastor Jake seconded this statement in a separate conversation, "part of our role as pastors and leaders

in the church is to help people become self-feeders so that they go and study the Scriptures on their own, [get] involved in a small group, [and do] a Bible study . . . our job as pastors isn't just to spoon feed everybody. It is to help them learn to feed themselves and grow spiritually." The Ephesians passage above emphasizes that the church operates best when leaders train and empower church members to use their gifts, ensuring the strength of the entire body. These gifts are given to prevent spiritual immaturity and to foster a healthy, fruit-filled church.

Given this information, obeying the voice of the Spirit and maturing together is a prolonged process that requires humility, intentionality, and devotion. By noting how the body (behaviors), soul (attitude/mood), and spirit (heart posture) all intermix in congregants—the unity of these three elements is what must remain congruent within a person to exemplify the fruits of the Spirit. The character traits of the Spirit are what *must* be genuinely experienced/actualized. In living out this trajectory and following Dante's model of allowing the Spirit to challenge growth areas, the body will assuredly grow spiritually/emotionally, increase in unity, and witness to the secular world with increased power.²⁴

Anthropological Implications

Communicating with the divine has numerous implications for anthropology. Accepting the reality of transcendent communication—direct, subjective experience with the supernatural—would require a fundamental shift in anthropology's ontology. Researchers might shift from merely studying belief systems to actively engaging with them. This notion heavily challenges traditional, secular methodologies (Adkins 2026).

However, it also forces a reevaluation of the boundary between mundane reality, cultural imagination, and religious experience. It disrupts the traditional "hands-off" approach of a detached

²¹Matthew 5:48

²²1 Peter 1:16

²³“Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. . . . We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:13-16 NIV).

²⁴2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV): “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

observer, instead suggesting a cognitively sympathetic, religiously/experientially “open” approach to scientific study (Gorbanenko 2024). From my perspective as a Christian and a student of anthropology, this approach comes quite naturally. I can worship amid the people I study, pray with my interlocutors, and discuss (with full belief and trust) the ways the divine is enacting powerful spiritual experiences among church members. I have prayed with congregants, done Bible studies with them, and taken communion alongside them. This cross between spiritual experience and scientific study creates an existential tension that needs to be addressed in the professional realm.

Especially in the case of shared ontologies and values, transcendent communication bridges the gap between the researcher and the studied, where an anthropologist experiences the same phenomenon as their interlocutors. This occurred for me when I engaged in spiritual intercession with some of my informants, also hearing a word from the Lord alongside them. This personal experience validates the supernatural as part of the human experience and encourages interlocutors to share more.

Rather than framing such experiences as mystical or irrational from an anthropological standpoint, I suggest that these encounters are part of normal cognitive, social, and religious experiences. This relationship with the supernatural, referred to as “supernormal” or “extraordinary experiences,” moves the spiritual from the fringe into the focal point of human studies (Shanafelt 2011). Consider researchers like Timothy Larsen (2014), Edith Turner (1978), and Bruce Grindal (1983)—all of whom acknowledge spiritual experiences as viable anthropological inquiries, respect religious tradition, and engage with the supernatural as a part of legitimate human experiences. By normalizing divine encounters, the anthropological field is more consistently fulfilling its call to engage in cultural relativity, instead of positing that spirituality is mystical or fabricated by human emotion (Durkheim 1912). To dismiss and detach oneself from the spiritual is in direct opposition to anthropology’s commitment to engage in respectful, engaged epistemological analysis of culture.

While I am not claiming that an anthropologist must engage in religious practices they are not comfortable with, it is worth considering the powerful impact of the transcendent realm. Theology and

anthropology complement one another quite well if a researcher is willing to remove the blinders of bias against religion and fully immerse themselves into the power of the Spirit’s influence. By looking at biblical texts, my research shows that Christian ethics stem from character traits that are only actualized through the fruits of knowing the Holy Spirit. Without living in step with Him, love is not sustained, joy is not maintained, peace is not continuous, kindness runs out, goodness is flawed, gentleness gives way, faithfulness fades, patience vanishes, and self-control is only temporary. “Will not those who have ears, hear?” (Matthew 13:9, in Dreyer 2021, 14). I implore that it be made clear that Christian ethics can never be fully realized without the living presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, studying and knowing the Holy Spirit provides a fundamental understanding of moral integrity and virtuous living, and without Him, one cannot truly understand Christian ethics (cf. Dreyer 2021, 13).

However, while it is not surprising that the secular world rejects the reality of the presence of the Holy Spirit,²⁵ I must inquire—what deep-rooted moral, ethical, and spiritual truths are lost without an ongoing relationship with the Spirit? What realities of human interactivity and cross-cultural understanding may the anthropological field be missing? If knowledge of the Spirit feeds comprehension of truth, reality, and morality, consider how much anthropological research might be enhanced by the leadership of the Holy Spirit. “To understand the sanctified experience . . . one [must] understand—and ultimately *feel* the power of the Spirit. Otherwise . . . one can only sit there and look” (Hinson 1999, 2). In the same way, without engaging with the Spirit and becoming sanctified into deeper holiness, an anthropologist can only sit there and look through a dark glass—capturing a muddled understanding of human realities. It is critical, therefore, that the scholastic realm respect diverse sociocultural experiences (including religious ones) and remain open to the spirit realm as a plausible portion of the human experience.

Conclusion: The Ethical Responsibility of Spiritual Awareness

My academic research challenges both the body of believers and the secular anthropological realm. I encourage both entities to go deeper; to consider their

²⁵1 Corinthians 2:14

own ethical and practical realities, to open themselves up toward a more transcendent-led way of life. In doing so, the field of anthropology could benefit from a Christianized outlook on religious studies. The Holy Spirit offers moral clarity, practical wisdom, ethical insight, and interpersonal guidance—as both the source of compassion and the root of ethnographic and scholastic knowing. Through interpersonal communication and time spent with interlocutors, the Holy Spirit revealed Himself as the initiator of moral standards, working through the inner life of the individual and the collective body to actualize deeper levels of congruent biblical behaviors. My research, then, seeks to show how a system of ethics that relies on the precepts of the Bible enacted through the power of the Holy Spirit is not only logically sound and conceptually true, but also practical, beneficial, and effective when applied to real-life situations.

In considering implications for the life of the Church, several encouraging challenges for a greater practice of ethics arise. How intentionally are the people of God striving for an infilling of the Spirit? How deeply are congregants seeking after the heart of God, with the goal of intentionally embodying the fruits of the Spirit?²⁶ How willing is the body to engage in critical self-reflection (Percy 2018), humble servitude (Backues 2017), and active denial of self (Luke 9:23)? While these are complex, epistemologically challenging questions, they are necessary for the people of God to consider if they wish to testify for Christ powerfully, live in-tune with the Spirit of God, and intentionally impact believers and nonbelievers with spiritual truth.

These ethical challenges are primarily for the health and benefit of the Church, so God's people may be unified, peace-filled, gracious, kind and giving—building up a strong body, one secure and capable of fulfilling God's role for each person.²⁷ Yet, if a Christian wishes to experience the depths of Christ's character, these intense ethical inquiries must be debated within the life of every church. Scripture acts

as a light that exposes human hearts and provides discernment (Hopper 2025).²⁸ To attain this wisdom, one must align one's own life with God's character, obey His commandments, and live righteously rather than hiding in sinful darkness. I must ask, stepping back, what is darker than a church unaware/closed off to spiritual truth? Let me confirm here—I am not claiming that my church of study is walking in darkness. Rather, I hope to encourage the body to take seriously their spiritual position before Christ. It is necessary for individuals and the body at WDC to concordantly embody the fruits of the Spirit and build treasures in heaven. This is where knowing the truth of God and walking in it sets believers free,²⁹ allowing them to live a life of congruence, institutional clarity, and individual joy before God—where believers effectively follow righteous statutes.³⁰

The Spirit works through people, including those who function as prophets in the church. In my research, this was seen through Dante, the Weberian prophet who instituted notable change. Every story has a wildcard, and Dante was that wildcard for Wesleyan Discipleship. While some may argue he is used by the Spirit and others may not agree, it is undeniable that, like a prophet, he has operated somewhat outside established Wesleyan institutional structures, claimed to receive personal revelations from the supernatural, and acted as an intermediary, delivering messages to the community. Arriving at a time of social change and a desire for renewal within the church, Dante has contributed significantly to restructuring the status quo and motivating congregants to engage in spiritual reflection. All of this allows the community to consider individual and collective ethical practice and re-engage in self-growth through the Spirit more deeply.

Therefore, the Spirit is the crux of it all, working through the shadows of church life to create a unified body of believers. The Holy Spirit, the initiator of righteous living, strives to mature His followers into strong (emotionally, spiritually) servant leaders, who can maintain an ongoing transcendent-human

²⁶Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, goodness, self-control, see Galatians 5:22-23.

²⁷Ephesians 4:15-16; Romans 12:4-6

²⁸Psalms 119:105

²⁹John 8:32

³⁰Psalms 19:8-9

relationship, as well as a collective, smooth-flowing dynamic with other Christians.³¹ All of this is for the growth and spiritual maturity of the church, meant to be actualized because of love for God and care for one's community. These dynamics may emulate Martyn Percy's perspective on the varied reality of a theological environment: "its strength may still lie in its apparent paradoxes: its unity in its diversity, its coherence in its difference, its shape in its diffusiveness, its hope in a degree of faithful doubt, its energy in passionate coolness" (2018, 311). In much the same way, WDC may in fact be growing stronger, even with its increase in tension between the liturgical, social, relational, and spiritual aspects of the church.

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³¹ "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4 NIV); "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18 ESV).



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NEWS & OPINIONS

Faithfully Praying in the Same Direction—Together

Lindy Backues and Achmad Munjid

This article explores the development and impact of a profound interfaith friendship between an American Christian and an Indonesian Muslim, highlighting collaborative efforts to promote mutual understanding and respect amidst diverse religious backgrounds. The authors recount their individual journeys, their own cultural exchanges, and the challenges they have faced in bridging religious divides. By way of both academic analysis and personal reflections, the authors emphasize the importance of authentic, humble, listening religious dialogue, the limitations of secularism in accommodating deep religious convictions, and the transformative potential of interfaith solidarity and openness. The authors advocate for a conceptual shift from bounded to centered sets in religious identity, suggesting that genuine devotion and service to humanity do a better job of defining religious belonging. This approach aims to foster inclusivity without compromising individual faith tenets, offering a model for peaceful coexistence and cooperative action in pluralistic societies.

A Prayer for the Wounds of Surabaya (Doa Luka Surabaya)¹

Oh, Magnificent God of Glory!

This day, at mid-day, the UGM [University of Gadjah Mada] academic community gathers at our beloved Balairung Campus, bowing our heads and lifting our prayers to You with deeply wounded hearts, with thoughts sundered, with souls seared by sting.

Wounded are our hearts, torn are our thoughts, and our souls groan within us in pain, since we no longer are able to count the number of times we have been forced to endure such atrocious, terrorist acts—inclusive of those we are compelled to face this very morning. We will never tire trying to understand why persons can so ruthlessly be bent on obliterating the lives of others for the sake of an ideology filled with

hate. Yet, you decree in Surah al-Maidah 32, “Whoever kills an innocent human being, it is as if he had killed all of humanity”. Countless innocent victims have fallen all around us. Far too frequently, therefore, has all of humanity been murdered in this beloved land of ours.

Oh, Magnificent God of All Power!

We pray as children of this land, as persons deeply religious, as fellow human beings, we beseech that You would enable us to pass through this crisis in a spirit of deep togetherness, that we might see each other as family, as a community tightly united. This tragedy costs us greatly and it is difficult for us to bear. May the severe cost and the heavy burden this calamity now forces upon us draw us much closer to You and to each other, enabling us to emerge from chaos engaged once

¹This prayer was originally composed in the Indonesian language by Achmad Munjid and thereafter translated into English by Lindy Backues (Munjid & Backues 2018). Sadly, it was offered at a ceremony of mourning on the campus of University of Gadjah Mada on the 17th of May 2018, in response to suicide bombings that had taken place at churches in the city of Surabaya just a week prior.

The contents of the prayer, the fact that it *is* a prayer, and the fact both authors of the present article played an integral role in composing it, serve as a powerful example of the type of approach we advocate for here. For details of the tragic incidents that inspired this prayer, see (BBC News 2018).

again in deep peace and mutual respect. Enable us to take up the meaningful work of empowering one another. May our children grow and learn in joy, may they march forward into a future filled with hope cherished deeply within their breasts.

Oh, Magnificent God of Great Might!

Grant us Your strength that we might not shrink as we confront terrorists; endow us with collective boldness that we might proclaim Your truth. Clarify our thoughts, purify our hearts, enable us to recognize what is right, what is true, to identify what is merely vanity, to label that which is wrong as, simply, wrong. We are convinced that terrorism embraces no religion, that it springs not from authentic patriotism. It besmirches true religious values, it distorts the bonds of communal life, it smears and smudges the genuine face of humanity. We take refuge in You; protect us from distortions such as this. Bestow upon us, too, opportunities for repairing the breaches in our souls and bodies, a result accomplished only by way of principled efforts undergirded by patience and godly submission of prayers lifted to You.

Oh, Magnificent God of Deep Forgiveness!

We pray that you receive with compassion these victims who have fallen as a result of these acts of terrorism in Surabaya, for the victims in Depok too, as well as for those in other locations—receive them in Your magnanimous love, that love which springs eternal. Forgive them, Lord, and receive their good works of mercy, lay them to rest at that most precious place, by Your side, a site fit for the holy, for the sincere, for the fallen and the martyrs, for those rightly counted as noble. May the heartbreaking deaths of these victims heighten our awareness of how precious is the life of each and every soul, and how deeply valuable are good relationships between us; this fact, too, is mandated by the teaching of the Prophet and by our holy scriptures. With the deepest of sympathy do we lift our prayers for the families of the victims. Grant to them patience and steadfastness, by way of the embrace of Your safekeeping. We pray that events such as these never recur in our midst. We simply pray that there be no more victims like these here in our land. May You tend to the needs of these families and to the needs of their descendants, both during these difficult days, as well as in the days to come.

Oh, Magnificent God of Guidance!

We pray that you prick the conscience and open the eyes of the perpetrators of these terrorist acts, those who are still alive, who wallow yet in hate for their fellow human beings, for persons they do not know, for persons who know them not. We ask that you visit them with Your guidance and with a clarity of spirit, that they might hasten to return to Your truth, that they might leave behind the hate that infects their breasts. We also ask that you banish this ideology of malice from their families and their descendants, that the downward spiral of evil might be arrested before it claims other victims. May you enlighten as well those who sympathize with these terrorists, whether in ways that directly confront them with the truth or by way of means that lead them there indirectly. May we all rid ourselves of every variety of vengeance, not giving space to seeds of enmity that we too easily allow to grow within our hearts.

Oh, Magnificent God, the Most Just!

Bestow upon our police and upon our legislators the physical and spiritual strength they will need, so that they might perform their duties properly, bringing all perpetrators of these terrible acts and those in their networks to justice, standing firmly beside all that is just and in accordance with the dictates of law, prosecuted to its fullest extent, with wisdom and direction bestowed by Your hand.

Oh, Magnificent God of Guidance!

Impart as well strength and resolve to our political and community leaders, so that we might take steps into the future that are guided by a deep, clear, pure, and honorable vision. Prevent further conflict from materializing, the sort of disagreement that would surely sink us into mutual blame and accusation, since this is the hope of those who incited this tragedy, a hope based merely on narrow and misguided personal and group interests. Grant to our leaders accomplishment as well as guidance, so that they might prioritize the common good, goals in our nation's best interests based upon good conscience and clear reasoning.

Oh, Magnificent God of Love and Mercy!

Brighten our hearts with the bounty of Your love and care in order that we might overcome hate and malice, whether personal or collective. May the religious faith we personally embrace not be reduced to imprisoning walls of separation, but may it instead serve as a medium for mutual tribute and mutual cooperation between us, a respect based upon our common citizenship in this great land of ours. Keep us safe in body and spirit. Guide our words, our thoughts, and our actions so that we might arise as persons who humanize each other in a commonality that is safe, serene, just, peaceful, and tranquil, all in the shadow of Your merciful presence and love.

You are the One who hears, You are the One who bestows, You are the One who grants us our prayers. To You alone do we lift our prayers of petition for the healing of our wounded hearts, our lacerated thoughts, our battered souls. As the protector of all of creation, You only are the restorer of our spirits. In the end, all that we are and all on earth that is returns to You. Great God, hear this, our prayer, we pray.

Both of us are individuals of deep religious faith, actively engaged in academic and faith communities—one primarily in the United States and the other in Indonesia. A shared experience we often encounter is the potential marginalization of religious individuals in academia. Frequently, we find ourselves justifying our unapologetic religious perspectives to academic colleagues, a task made challenging by the increasingly secular nature of global higher education. This challenge is notably more prevalent in the global north compared to the global south. Over the years, we have supported each other in this shared quest, despite belonging to different faith traditions—one Muslim, the other Christian.

We have significantly participated in each other's religious communities, and we take pride in our deep understanding and mutual respect for each other's contexts. Our friendship is built on this profound

mutual fondness. However, the global faith communities we represent have often been at odds, sometimes with tragic results, such as the 2018 suicide bombing in Surabaya. We aim to offer hope to those seeking to overcome such animosity, believing that neither of our faith traditions is defined by these tragic outcomes. Our work together strives for peace through mutual understanding, exemplified by our support for each other's research and our fluency in each other's language.

This brings us to the rationale for this article, centered around two main issues:

We clearly have a common problem as religious persons, especially in relation to the prevailing "neutral" secularism that we often encounter in our places of work. This supposedly impartial way of thinking, in our experience, at worst serves to systematically demote religious discourse to nonsense deserving ridicule, thereby belittling the contribution of persons like us in the academy. At best, secularism attempts to "necessarily" translate our "deep grammar" theological discourse into a disenchanted secular language divorced from its often-inherent metaphysical foundations (presumably, so that it might become something that everyone can embrace). We both contend that the type of speech most often faithful to our religious convictions is commonly secured by concepts not so easily translated into secular ways of speaking (i.e., we believe our convictions are often inescapably moored to religious conceptual justifications, ones that serve to undergird them and animate their logic). Thus, we are joined in a common cause: we would like to make room for authentic religious dialogue at the table of public discourse, whether that table be found in the academy or in public spaces located in society in general.²

At the same time, each of us deeply embraces a personal variety of a grand, historic, global faith tradition—one Muslim, one Christian. We both readily admit that these global faith systems differ profoundly in terms of their own deep grammar when it comes to understanding the divine and in terms of potential divine encounters. In a word, there are

² While we will not directly explore this first point in our conversation below, this article *will* serve as evidence of the type of speech that is permitted once "neutral" secularism is recognized as not actually being neutral. Nonetheless, many others *have* dived quite deeply into the assertion we make here; examples include (but should not be limited to): Appadurai (1996); Asad (2003); Asad (2018); Asad, Brown, Butler, & Mahmood (2009); Berger (1979); Browning & Schüssler Fiorenza (1992); Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West (2011); Clouser (2005); Hamid (2016); MacIntyre (1981); MacIntyre (1988); Mahmood (2015); Masuzawa (2005); Milbank (1990); Newbigin (1988); Newbigin (1989); Polanyi (1974); Rahman (1982); Sharpe & Nickelson (2014); Taylor (2004); Taylor (2007); and Wolterstorff (1988).

clearly marked disagreements at the core of what might be called the historic, macro-Islamic religious point of view and the historic, macro-Christian, religious point of view. We frequently see things differently and we often hold dear theological tenets that are quite contrasting at various junctures.

Our Backgrounds and Our Journeys

Backues

I remember the first time we met, back in 2010 at St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Church in South Philadelphia, close to where I live. It was August 17th—Indonesian Independence Day—and my family and I were enjoying the celebration organized by the South Philadelphia Indonesian community. As my wife and I sampled treats that reminded us of Indonesia (we had returned to the States only two years prior), I noticed a young couple—clearly Muslim and Indonesian—with their children, standing quietly in a corner of the fellowship hall. Occasionally, Indonesians, both Muslim and Christian, approached them with warm greetings, indicating their respect and popularity in the community. Curious and eager to meet them, I walked up to introduce myself.

When I extended my hand and greeted you in Indonesian, both you and your wife seemed surprised and intrigued—a common reaction to a tall, large American man in his fifties speaking fluent Indonesian. That meeting marked the beginning of our long-lasting friendship, built on my 18 years of living in your birth country and your extensive cross-cultural experiences, including your time in Philadelphia as a Masters and then PhD student at Temple University. Your role as a founder of the first Indonesian mosque in South Philadelphia, now near my home, also played a significant part.

When we first met, I was a professor at Eastern University outside of Philadelphia and I was also an elder at *Philadelphia Praise Center* (PPC), an Indonesian Mennonite Church led by a mutual friend of ours. In 2006, PPC had generously lent their building to your Muslim congregation, Masjid Al-Falah, for Tarawih prayers during Ramadhan, an act that fostered a close relationship between our two faith communities. Though this act of kindness drew criticism from local church leaders, it was seen by PPC's leadership as the right thing to do, something

that embodied the teachings of Jesus. At the time, you were the head ustad and main imam at Al-Falah, a connection I only learned about later.

Our friendship fits seamlessly into the trajectory of my wife's and my life in Indonesia. We moved there in 1989, and despite occasional trips abroad, West Java was our home until our deportation in 2007. Our daughter, adopted at two months old, grew up in West Java, and our ethnically Javanese son spent his early years in Tasikmalaya. Our time in Indonesia spanned significant events, from two Gulf wars and a variety of local riots to the fall of Suharto and the 2004 tsunami. These experiences shaped our understanding of Indonesian society and deepened our bonds with the local Muslim community.³

As a faith-based development practitioner, I helped found three community development organizations in Indonesia, focusing on multicultural, multiethnic, and inter-religious cooperation. This work, while successful, eventually led to friction with the local government and our subsequent deportation. Despite the challenges, our integration into Indonesian society was profound. We lived like locals, navigated urban slums, and engaged deeply with Muslim communities to avoid being tokenized by local churches.

When we were in the US we struggled to adjust to Indonesian church culture, feeling more at home in the Muslim religious climate due to our close friendships with Indonesian Muslims. Our development work had been intentionally interfaith, reflecting the religious diversity of Indonesia. We believed in integrating various religious perspectives, fostering mutual respect and cooperation.

This rich history is what I brought with me when I approached you at St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Over the years, I've come to value your own deep devotion and interfaith experiences. Our relationship, built on mutual respect and understanding, serves as a testament to how individuals with different religious backgrounds can come together to explore and understand the divine.

Munjid

I grew up in an environment where everyone looked like me, spoke my language, practiced the same religion, and shared my traditions and culture. My devout Muslim family lived in a poor rural area of Central Java, Indonesia, where Islam is the majority

³The interfaith nature of Backues's work in Indonesia and the model that sustained it is outlined in Backues (2009).

faith, comprising 87% of the population. In this setting, I formed a specific image of Christians: they were rich, smart, good-looking, powerful, and dangerous. This stereotype remained unchallenged throughout my school years, from elementary to secondary school. Consequently, whenever I met someone who seemed smart, fancy, or from a higher social class, I immediately suspected they were Christian. When I did meet self-identified Christians, they often matched these superior attributes, reinforcing my stereotype.

Financial hardship during my high school years led me to seek employment, and my employer happened to be both Chinese and Christian. My limited encounters with Christians consistently confirmed my existing image of them, deepening my inferiority complex. I felt poor, incapable, ugly, powerless, and threatened in their presence due to the perceived power differential.

Christians were dangerous not only because of their visible power but also because of their missionary efforts to convert Muslims. They were seen as both politically hostile and theologically toxic. This view was reinforced by the theological teachings I received in Islamic boarding school. As a result, this stereotype of Christians became deeply ingrained in my psyche, evoking both admiration and suspicion.

My perception of Christians was also influenced by the historical context in Indonesia, where Christianity arrived bundled with Westernization, modernity, and colonialism. The simultaneous arrival of Christianity and Dutch colonialism from the 17th century onward linked Christianity with these aspects in the Indonesian mind. A common Javanese phrase derisively aimed at converts to Christianity was, “He is no longer Javanese, but he is not yet Dutch,” reflecting the perceived loss of cultural identity. For many Muslims, Christianity symbolized the ruling elite’s political power, intellectual sophistication, and moral cruelty.

In response, Javanese Muslims often framed the situation as an “us-them” dichotomy, believing that while Christians had power, Muslims possessed moral piety. During the 1970s and 80s, under President Suharto’s rule, policies favored Christians, further entrenching Muslim stereotypes about Christians. The dominance of Chinese Christians in the economy after

the 1965 communist massacre also reinforced these views. Muslims felt like a “majority with a minority mentality,” perceiving themselves as inferior despite being the demographic majority. This perception was compounded by global political dynamics and Indonesia’s colonial history, profoundly shaping my own views.

However, my perspective began to change slowly during my university years in Yogyakarta. Initially active in the Muslim Student Association at Gajah Mada University, I held a dualistic worldview, seeing the world as a battle between good (Muslims) and evil (non-Muslims). I believed that anything not Islamic was immoral and needed reform or elimination. Christians were seen as particularly dangerous due to their perceived goal of converting the Indonesian population (Shihab 1995).

During the mid-90s, as student opposition to Suharto’s authoritarianism grew, religious groups, including Muslims and Christians, began to unite against him. This shift in perspective influenced me personally. Through my studies and interactions with people of different faiths, I began to see Christians who did not fit my previous stereotypes. I made friends with Christians and other non-Muslims who were kind and sincere, challenging my preconceived notions.

The fall of Suharto in 1998 provided crucial lessons beyond practical politics. I realized that morality was not exclusive to Muslims. Suharto, a Muslim, was a cruel dictator, and his actions contradicted the Islamic values I cherished. This realization forced me to question my long-held theological doctrines and inspired me to pursue graduate work in religious studies and engage in interfaith initiatives.⁴

My journey eventually brought me to the United States in order to go deeper with my academic research. As a graduate student at Temple University, I met Lindy and his family in South Philadelphia. Lindy had recently returned to the US after 18 years in Indonesia as a social activist with a theological vision. We bonded over our shared scholarly and religious convictions, and our support of each other has strengthened our friendship over time.

⁴ For insight into Munjid’s ideas and experiences working toward interfaith understanding in Indonesia see Munjid (2008).

The Conceptual Bases for Our Admiration and Differences

Munjid

In the past, I firmly believed that all non-Muslims were “kafir,” a term often translated “non-believer” or “infidel.” I acknowledged that there were good Christians, kind Hindus, and very nice Buddhists who lived exemplary moral lives and were a joy to know. These individuals could be neighbors, colleagues, or even friends. However, I believed that unless they converted to Islam, they would ultimately go to hell. As a Muslim, I knew I needed to get along with these people in this life, but I did not believe they would be saved in the hereafter. To me, they were unfortunate—either ignorant of the truth or consciously choosing the wrong path despite the truth of Islam evident to them.

Conversely, I recognized that there were bad Muslims who committed sins and lived immoral lives. Nevertheless, if they affirmed the *shahada*—the Muslim confession of faith—they would go to heaven after accounting for their missteps. The equation was simple: Islam saves Muslims, and only Islam can save a person in the hereafter.

From this perspective, it seemed justifiable that non-Muslims would go to hell and Muslims to heaven. I saw God’s revelation in the Qur’an as clear and universal, presenting Islam as the only true path to salvation. Belief in or rejection of this truth determined one’s eternal fate, with consequences based on those choices. Being nice or not was a temporary condition, whereas a person’s faith—specifically, whether they embraced Islam—was the defining factor for their eternal destiny. God granted people the freedom to decide, and they received rewards or punishments accordingly. This view made perfect sense to me and seemed clear and fair.

This was my position, and I believe it is a view held by many Muslims today.

While these words are Munjid’s, similar sentiments could be expressed by Backues. In his early 20s, he too believed God would condemn to eternal perdition those who did not embrace the (Christian) truth as he did. This stance is still strongly held by a significant portion of conservative Christianity.

However, neither of us aligns with this position any longer. In the remainder of this article, we will explore several points related to how our views have evolved and what we now believe.

There is a word that often appears in Muslim circles (the idea is also present in Christian contexts), a term that is frequently misunderstood and misused by both Muslims and non-Muslims. We wish to clarify its meaning here to help the reader better understand how we currently view each other. The word is *kafir*, an Arabic/Semitic term usually translated “infidel” or “unbeliever” in English (we will examine this term in more detail below).

Given our previous discussions, the questions arise: how do we presently view each other? Perhaps more importantly, how *should* we view each other? And fundamentally, what should serve as the conceptual basis for our interactions now and our present views on each other’s “eternal destiny”? We come from two vastly different faith traditions with strongly delineated religious perspectives, outlooks that traditionally permit little, if any, crossover between us. In some circles, it might even be questioned whether our traditions can allow any crossover at all. These are crucial questions we feel compelled to explore, as they significantly influence our relationship and how we have learned to see each other over the course of the last several years.

Bounded vs. Centered Sets

We believe that a primary reason each of us previously excluded outsiders from God’s favor lies in how we maintained strict conceptual boundaries around our respective faith communities. Munjid’s statement above illustrates clear conceptual segregations, dividing all individuals into “in” vs. “out,” based on Islamic group membership. Those “in” for him were those who were self-described adherents of Islam (including Muslims not living admirable lives), while those “out” were non-Muslims, inclusive of all Christians. Similarly, Backues, early in his faith journey, drew analogous boundaries around his Christian community, where “in” encompassed Christians and “out” referred to non-Christians. Our perspectives on the outside world were framed by simple, unproblematic boundaries—or so we thought at the time.

Today, we draw religious categories in a completely different manner, though we still recognize the importance of boundaries. This conceptual shift can best be explained through an examination of “set theory,” a method of categorization derived from

mathematics, particularly as it has been explored in the work of Mennonite anthropologist Paul Hiebert.⁵

In a series of articles, Hiebert described three types of sets: (1) bounded sets, (2) centered sets, and (3) fuzzy sets. We have already encountered the first type—bounded sets—in our discussion above: in bounded sets, objects are statically contained within fixed, given, and unvarying domains. In is in, out is out. As Hiebert explains:

In creating a bounded set our mind puts together things that share some common characteristics. “Apple,” for example, are objects that are “the firm fleshy somewhat round fruit of a Rosaceous tree. They are usually red, yellow or green and are eaten raw or cooked” (Hiebert 1978, 26).

Given this way of thinking, such a conceptual categorization is quite necessary. Hiebert summarizes:

Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics—that is, they force us to look at things in a certain way

- a. The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set . . .
- b. The category is defined by a clear boundary . . .
- c. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics . . .
- d. Bounded sets are static sets . . . (1978, 26)

However, the perspective changes drastically when one’s posture shifts to a “centered set” approach. Centered sets are organized . . .

- a. by defining a center, and the relationship of things to that center . . . Some things may be far from the center, but they are moving *towards* the center, therefore, they are part of the centered set. On the other hand, some objects may be near the center but are moving away from it, so they are not a part of the set. The set is made up of all objects moving towards the center.

- b. While the centered set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and things moving out. The set focuses upon the *center* and the boundary emerges when the center and the movement of the objects have been defined. There is no great need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set. The boundary *is* so long as the center is clear.
- c. Centered sets reflect variation within a category. While there is a clear distinction between things moving in and those moving out, the objects within the set are not categorically uniform. Some may be near the center and others far from it, even though all are moving towards the center. Each object must be considered individually. It is not reduced to a single common uniformity within the category.
- d. Centered sets are dynamic sets. Two types of movements are essential parts of their structure. First, it is possible to change direction—to turn from moving away to moving towards the center, from being outside to being inside the set. Second, because all objects are seen in constant motion, they are moving, fast or slowly, towards or away from the center. Something is always happening to an object. It is never static. (1978 28, emphasis in the original)

We must remember that both bounded and centered sets have clearly defined boundaries regarding group membership: in both, individuals are classified as either in or out. The difference lies not in the existence of boundaries but in how the boundaries are drawn. Bounded set borders are static and are based on clear, uniform, unvarying features that are shared by all members. In contrast, centered sets are defined first by establishing a center, and then by determining the direction each member is moving in relation to that center.

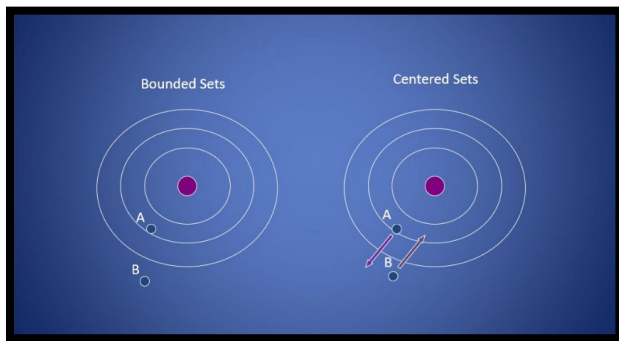
Hiebert also describes a third type of set, a configuration he calls “fuzzy” sets. In fuzzy sets, membership is not easily established, and boundaries

⁵ See Hiebert (1978) and Yoder, Lee, Ro, & Priest (2009).

are much less clear.⁶ Objects within fuzzy sets are not confined by clear mental boundaries; members simply “are,” with little emphasis on verifying group membership. While these sets are interesting, we will focus more on bounded and centered sets, as these will offer to us greater clarity for understanding our journeys. However, we *will* briefly return to fuzzy sets later, to clarify a particular aspect of set membership.

This image highlights key differences between bounded and centered sets:

Figure 1
Bounded and Centered Sets



Both diagrams above include a Point A and a Point B, placed roughly in similar locations. To understand the key differences between these two arrangements we need to consider the meaning of the arrows in the centered sets diagram on the right.

In Bounded Sets, Point A is clearly a member since it lies within the concentric rings of the diagram; Point B, on the other hand, is outside the set, since it is outside all of the boundary rings. This represents a classic bounded set configuration where members are classified “in” and non-members “out” at a given, static point in time. Think of a snapshot.

In contrast, group membership of Points A and B looks quite different when viewed from a centered set perspective. Although Point A is within some rings and Point B is still outside all rings, a centered set perspective takes into consideration the movement

each evinces in relation to the center; this movement is indicated by the arrows. Trajectory and direction, rather than static position, determines set membership here. In this case, Point A is moving away from the center, while Point B is moving increasingly closer to the center. From this vantage point, B is a set member, while A is not, since A is drifting away from the center. Think of a motion picture.

This difference clarifies how the two of us have come to understand our own religious identities and the religious identities of those around us. Our thinking has shifted from a bounded set arrangement to a centered set one. We now embrace a center comprised of active devotion and worship, evidenced by one’s lifestyle—a lifestyle humbly aligned with God’s will, a way of living validated by ongoing, daily activities. We believe that, irrespective of how a person self-identifies (as Christian, as Muslim, or as secular), those demonstrating consistent care for others—especially for the poor and marginalized—are “authentic worshippers of God.” We classify these individuals as “in” within our religious set, since their trajectory aligns with a God-centered direction. Conversely, those who do not serve in this way, regardless of their static, bounded set membership within a religious community, are outside the centered set boundaries that we embrace. For us, these individuals are *not* authentic God-seekers.

This central factor has solidified our friendship over the years. We are drawn to each other because of this inclusive—yet still delimited—understanding of religious identity. Sometimes, we even feel more in sync with each other than we do with our own co-religionists, persons who often adhere to bounded set understandings of religious membership.

This camaraderie leads us to another point that offers insight into our bounded vs. centered set rubric. In interfaith dialogue, there is a common framework that divides interfaith theological positions into three types: (1) exclusivity, (2) pluralism, and (3) inclusivity. While this framework is at first blush helpful, we think it best to slightly rebrand this sort of nomenclature,

⁶ Yoder, Lee, Ro, and Priest outline fuzzy sets in the following way:

- Membership in a category is based on relationship to other things.
- The boundary is fuzzy with no sharp point of transition between one and the other.
 - Membership is one of degrees; varying distances exist from center.
 - Change or conversion is a process, not an instantaneous about-face. (2009, 180)

following the lead of Christian missiologist J. Andrew Kirk.⁷

Particularity, Universality, and Generality

We both now embrace a centered set understanding of religious group membership. Given this perspective, wouldn't it be easier to simply accept we worship the same God, albeit in different ways, and leave it at that? In other words, wouldn't this be the purest form of the centered set approach, focusing solely on the overall direction of one's spiritual journey and disregarding the specifics? A centered set acknowledges that each of us is oriented toward a common center—authentic and sincere worship of the one true God. Authentic worship, in this view, is expressed through one's daily acts of service, particularly toward the poor and the marginalized.

So, would it not be less complicated simply to overlook our differences and embrace the commonalities found in our beliefs, highlighting what unites us rather than what divides us? Interestingly, our shared answer to this question is both a firm “yes” and a firm “no”.

The truth is, we hold very different beliefs about God, with doctrinal and theological differences often almost incommensurable. At times this makes it challenging to bridge the conceptual divide between us. Our discussions over the years have delved deeply into these differences, leading us through many profound conversations. Therefore, we would like first to address the “no” side of the equation, and then we will

return to the “yes” to clarify our seemingly contradictory stance as to whether we indeed do worship the same God.

First, the “no.” The truth is, we do not mind if significant differences persist between us. As will soon be clear (and perhaps already is), these differences are not impediments to the healthy relationship we have built and we continue to enjoy. Undeniable contrasts like these have not prevented us from developing a sincere, warm, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationship. Instead, they have provided points for deeper discussions, topics that have piqued our interest, kept us curious, and encouraged our humility. In this way, we have ended up respecting each other not merely despite our differences but sometimes because of them. When we have pondered each other's very different faith positions—and responded to them with sincerity and integrity—true bonds of respect and attachment have emerged between us, almost as a gift from God. We pray this wonderful result shines through in this article, infusing our discussion here with light as we examine some very important themes together.

However, much depends on how we frame our differences, especially regarding what theologians call “salvation” and its relationship to “reprobation,” or the question of God consigning individuals to eternal punishment. Put differently, we might see this as how we each envision “the saveability” of the other.⁸ A

⁷ We agree with Fredericks when—speaking from a Christian perspective—he observes that “. . . exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism become less and less plausible the more we find out about the actual beliefs of our non-Christian neighbors” (Fredericks 1999, 166). Nonetheless, at this stage, we believe there is value in this type of three-fold division (or something like it), provided it serves as a heuristic device for illuminating issues involved in interfaith dialogue.

⁸ Catholic theologian Gavin D'Costa concisely isolates the principal questions from a Christian perspective (as Munjid's words above illustrate, a Muslim framing of the issue is equally imaginable):

“The difficulties can be conveniently focused in relation to two traditionally held Christian axioms. The first states that salvation is *through Jesus Christ alone*. If salvation is through Christ alone and there is no salvation outside Christianity (and Jesus did say according to John's gospel: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me’, John 14:6), can the Christian still believe in a God who desires the salvation of all humankind (Acts 14:17; I Timothy 2:4; Romans 2:6-7)? Could a loving God consign the majority of humankind to perdition because these people did not know Jesus, often through no fault of their own? . . .

Alternatively, if the stress falls on the second axiom that *God desires the salvation of all humankind*, is this salvation gained *through* or *despite* the non-Christian religions? If, on the one hand, salvation occurs through these religions, is there any need for mission? And what of Jesus' claim that he alone is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ and Christianity's claim to absoluteness? What of those within certain religions who do not even believe in a god, such as the Theravadin Buddhist or Advaitin Hindu? And what exactly is the status and worth of non-Christian scriptures, practices and beliefs? Are they all of equal value and if not, by what criteria should one decide?” (1986, 4, emphasis in the original).

three-fold taxonomy often appears in interfaith dialogue literature, focusing precisely on the central issue of who God saves. A brief exploration of this taxonomy will help clarify what we mean here.

D'Costa succinctly summarizes a classification system like this when he highlights the Christian form of the rubric:

Roughly speaking, pluralism is the position which claims that all religions, more or less, are equally valid ways in helping men and women find their way to God. Pluralists are usually critical of exclusivists, who hold that only Christianity (and often, a particular denominational version) is true, and exclusively capable of helping men and women to a full relationship with God. Pluralists usually argue that exclusivists have no grounds for real openness and tolerance toward other religions, nor have they anything to learn from these religions. The resultant attitude is politically translated into empire, imperialism, and aggressive mission. Of course, biblical, theological, and philosophical arguments are also employed by all groups. Inclusivism is often characterized as holding to the definitive truth of Christianity, but recognizing that other religions may be "lawful religions" (Rahner), even if in a provisional manner. (D'Costa 2000, 1, emphasis added)⁹

While we find this classification system helpful, we must realize that D'Costa's ideas here are not uniquely Christian. For instance, Muslim academic Fatimah Husein uses similar categories to evaluate Islamic community involvement in Muslim-Christian interactions in Indonesia.¹⁰ We apply a similar approach in examining our own faith traditions, whether Muslim or Christian. This framework

accurately reflects certain versions of these two grand traditions on a global scale.

A caveat is in order, though: it is at this point that we agree with missiologist J. Andrew Kirk when he notes that problems are prompted by the use of the three terms (1) exclusivism, (2) pluralism, and (3) inclusivism. "Exclusivism," says Kirk, "gives an immediate impression of narrow-mindedness, even bigotry." The emphasis seems to be on "exclusion" of others (as the expression implies), to the point religion becomes an exercise in gatekeeping, a filtering out of undesirables who might contaminate the religious system. On the other hand, "pluralism" often "[conjures] up the image of relativism, even a lack of concern"—a position averse to taking a prophetic stand against anything, a perspective so wishy-washy that it ends up with few solid resources for the type of meaning-seeking crucial to authentic religious commitment. Kirk claims that, with positions contoured in this way, a third position—"inclusivism"—ends up privileged, since it "appears to emphasise open-mindedness and tolerance." After all, as he goes on to note, does it not seem more "preferable to include than exclude, to be generous without being totally permissive" (2000, 127-128)? With this, the preferable position seems implied even before we explore the details involved. Like Kirk, we feel the terms exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism threaten to bias discussions from the outset, steering the conversation in a specific direction, reducing the appeal of two of the options, an unwise way to start such an important conversation. Therefore, we prefer—as does Kirk—three alternative terms: (1) particularity, (2) universality, and (3) generality (2000, 127-128). We will opt for one of these positions, but we aim to frame our initial investigations as fairly as possible, presenting equitably the choices before us.¹¹

⁹ See also D'Costa (1986). For a look at Karl Rahner's notion of a "lawful religion," see Rahner (1999). We will take a closer look at Rahner's thought just below.

¹⁰ See Husein (2005, especially 29-31).

¹¹ Yale Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck specifies three distinct types of doctrine or theological styles, each evincing its own logic or disposition. While we do not have space to fully delve into the comparison here, it is worth pointing out that we believe Lindbeck's categories resonate significantly with the *particularity*, *universality*, and *generality* system described here.

The first type of doctrine Lindbeck dubs classical *propositionalism*, a variety that "emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which . . . doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. . . . For a propositionalist, if a doctrine is once true, it is always true, and if it is once false, it is always false" (1984, 16). As we will soon see, this variety seems to most closely resemble what we are calling *particularity*.

Particularity

The particularity position—known previously as exclusivism—asserts that saving faith can be realized only within the confines of a specific faith system and the doctrinal boundaries embraced by its community. For instance, Christian particularity generally attests that

God's gift of salvation is available only through the atoning death of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and is appropriated through explicit faith in Jesus and ratified by baptism and membership of the Christian community. There may be some difference among people who hold this view as to the means by which people come to faith. For most, faith must come through hearing the word of the Gospel (Rom. 10:17); but for some it may come through the less normal means of visions or dreams. (Kirk 2000, 128)

Likewise, Muslim varieties of this position understand salvation as available to those who are unmistakable members of the Muslim community, i.e., those who openly affirm the *shahada* (the Muslim confession of faith) and who explicitly carry out (or seek to carry out) the universally acknowledged six pillars of Islamic faith. For a particularist, there must be overt, recognizable, and confessed allegiance on the part of every believer, usually marked by a conspicuous point of conversion. One must be able to point to a conscious, mental submission to the overt tenets of the faith in question. Clearly, the "particularity position" fits within a bounded sets configuration, fixed to a point in time and linked to punctiliar inclusion in a guarded community bound by a curated body of doctrine. Both of us embraced such a stance in the past, and we acknowledge that—given certain assumptions—it is rational and logical in its details. It deserves to be taken seriously, given its assumptions.

But it is precisely at the level of assumptions where one finds difficulties. Specifically, it assumes a static "placidness" for all religious adherents, bound by

The second type of doctrine Lindbeck calls *experiential expressive*. Typical of theological liberalism and much of the work taken up in comparative religions, this variety often condenses all distinctions into a common experiential soup—it frames "different religions [as] diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience" (1984, 16) or as "an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or of preconceptual experience" (1984, 34).

In short, this second variety boils down all religious grand traditions into a unitary, globally-familiar, experiential kernel that is variously embraced but commonly experienced—irrespective of cultural backdrops or distinctive themes present. This style easily becomes a form of elitist intellectual insight, with scholars positioned as the sole arbiters truly aware that, although different religious adherents describe their experiences using divergent language, images and devices, they are in fact speaking of the same thing. Everyday religious adherents—these academics seem to suggest—are simply too simple to know they are speaking of (and sometimes worshipping) the same concept. In our opinion, this variety most closely resembles what we will describe as *universality*.

In contrast to these two options, Lindbeck endorses what he calls a *cultural-linguistic* alternative. This framework combines the content element of the first type with the experiential element of the second. In this way, a religious tradition should be

viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a Kantian a priori, although in this case the a priori is a set of acquired skills that could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language . . . is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system. (1984, 33)

As will soon be clear—seeing as how this form is intimately tied to life-practice, to action, and to concrete experiences—this third type most closely resembles the *generality* pattern we will promote below.

group membership in the true “God-pleasing” community. Through our own journeys, we have come to believe these assumptions do not define religious allegiance. Instead, we view God as fully capable of reading the intentions of every heart, and it is God who ultimately decides who is in and who is out. Therefore, a person’s internal response to God’s desires is much more important in assessing religious commitment, as these desires are not hidden from God.

While we respect the particularity position, we reject it as a proper description of authentic religious piety, whether Christian or Muslim. Our stance aligns with the “centered set” model described earlier, which corresponds more faithfully with the generality stance we will explore below. But before we delve into that, let us first understand the second category: *universality*.

Universality

At the other end of the spectrum is the *universality* position—D’Costa calls this the *pluralism* perspective.

Kirk gets us started by outlining the Christian version of this position:

For the universalist, Jesus Christ is only one means of salvation among many others. God has devised not only different ways of attaining salvation through Christ, but a variety of ways of reaching him. Jesus Christ is one path among others. There has been a shift from a Christ-centred to a God-centred understanding of salvation. God’s salvation is universally available through many different channels. (Kirk 2000, 129-130)

While this viewpoint remains concerned with one’s salvation or “saveability,” it introduces a distinct difference regarding who can and will be saved: the inclusion aperture here opens very widely indeed. In this perspective, all will be “saved” in the end; ultimately, there will be no reprobation. This approach suggests that there is no one right way and no wrong ways—just different ways. Thus, while God’s favor rests

exclusively upon a select group of faithful persons in the particularity position, this position emphasizes that no grand religious tradition is ultimately unique: all religious understandings are equally salvific in nature (or, as Husein notes, universalists “tend to claim that all religions are the same” (2005, 31).¹²

On the surface, this seems a far more gracious stance, as it appears inviting, humble, and less self-assured compared to the particularity position. However, we find it has at least two significant pitfalls that give us pause.

First, this stance greatly devalues the particularities of *all* grand traditions,¹³ such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the other historically rich, globalized paths that millions (sometimes billions) of people hold dear as they make sense of the world. Specific narrative details embedded in religious systems often matter a great deal; they are not easily discarded. Moreover, who gets to decide which details are superfluous and which are not? As serious adherents of two great religious traditions, we often find it challenging to identify the central points of our own traditions definitively. Isolating indispensable features in each of our faith traditions is tricky—separating significant thematic wheat from disposable metaphysical chaff is never easy, and it seems hubristic and even rude for disengaged non-adherents to propose how simple and uncomplicated that task is.

Furthermore, as was underscored at the outset, condensing various religious systems into one fungible truth position usually leads to “desacralizing the sacred.” Religious discourse is often “translated” (and thereby demoted) into a disenchanted, secular, so-called “value-free” perspective divorced from its specific, intrinsic, metaphysical foundations.¹⁴ Many of our central convictions are fundamentally theological and spiritual; they resist desacralization and simplistic translation into independent, “neutral” idioms. Religious people worldwide have voiced such an objection—it is not unique to us.

Interestingly, this “universality position” aligns best with Hiebert’s “fuzzy set” configuration. Fuzzy sets

¹² We saw this claim echoed in Lindbeck’s description of the second type of doctrine, what he labels the *experiential expressive*.

¹³ Except for an Enlightenment funded grand tradition lurking and hidden and covertly smuggled in under the guise of being neutral: secularism. We will dig below the surface of this just below.

¹⁴ Debate over the translatability of religious language is the primary sticking point between Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor as they consider the proper role of religious speech in civil discourse. For an example of their discussion concerning this, see Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West (2011, 60-70).

have boundaries and borders that are not clearly established; from a universality stance, groupings are of little concern since all truth is unitary and distillable, making compartmentalized classifications unnecessary. In fuzzy sets, all-inclusive group membership describes the relationship between all things, with no central, teleological center advocated or desired. Moreover, since fuzzy sets paint everything as being of one essence, there are no sharp points of transition or moments of conversion; membership is ultimately guaranteed, and change for every member is a slow, linear process with no about-faces or turnarounds truly possible. In the other two systems, boundaries are where the transfer of membership occurs, from one set to another. In this view, everyone is on the right road; some simply need to wake up and realize that. For universalists, emphases on the particularities of religion only confuse, complicate, mislead, and exclude.

We find the universalist position unappealing and inaccurate; it does not properly describe the world we live in. In our experience, all roads do not lead to the same Rome; all traditions are not identical. Faith traditions embrace distinct—as we hinted above, often incommensurable—details that render them beautiful, even when they sometimes confuse or repel.

Generality

This third variety—which we call generality rather than inclusivity (following Kirk)—fits us best, as it aligns closely with the centered set approach we advocated above. Kirk effectively describes the Christian perspective of this viewpoint, and it is worthwhile hearing from him at length.

[The generality] position also affirms that salvation is available exclusively through Jesus Christ. However, it makes the means of appropriating salvation more general than the previous one. Whereas the best means may be through hearing the good news and responding affirmatively, there may be good reasons why this is not possible. For example, most people will never hear the Gospel in their own language during their lifetime. Even if they do, they may hear it in such a way that the message is obscured, either by the presentation or by the life of the messenger. It could be said, then, that millions of people will never have an adequate opportunity to respond to the offer of salvation in Christ.

According to this view, where people respond to the spiritual illumination they have, seeking in their religious practices God's mercy and forgiveness and attempting to live out a life of peace, reconciliation and justice, God's salvation in Christ is available to them. Or, to put the matter the other way round, those who do these things already demonstrate God's salvific grace at work in their lives. (2000, 128-129)

Fatimah Husein presents a description quite like this—though she uses the older terminology we have set aside—when she outlines a Muslim, Indonesian perspective. We adjust the terminology below to make it clearer.

- (1) As [generalists] perceive Islam as an evolving religion[,] they apply a contextual reading to the Qur'an and *sunna* [Islamic tradition]. This approach advocates reinterpreting the foundation texts of Islam. In this context, the role of *ijtihad* [scriptural interpretation] is central in their thinking.
- (2) Unlike the [universalists], who tend to claim that all religions are the same, the [generalists] hold that Islam is the best religion for them. Nevertheless, they believe salvation is also possible outside Islam, and therefore tend to be more tolerant of the faith of the "other". Within the [generalists'] writings, one will scarcely find harsh expressions directed towards other religious believers, more specifically Christians.
- (3) [Generalists] argue for the separation of Islam and the state. For them, the present structure of the Indonesian state is adequate. They acknowledge the validity of the Indonesian constitution, although it may seem secular to the [particularist] Muslims in that it does not clearly say that the state is responsible for religious matters in society. The [generalists] hold that within the Indonesian state both Muslims and non-Muslims should enjoy the same rights. In addition, they do not support the effort to implement the sharia [Islamic canonical law] in day to day life, as they do not perceive it as a set of rules but rather as moral guidance. (2005, 31)

The generalist position, as described above, aligns seamlessly with centered set arrangements. It is

characterized more by activities of worship and devotion and the nuances of a centered set lifestyle, emphasizing a humble posture toward others and God. The focus is on the direction one is heading rather than their current position. This involves aligning daily activities with God's will, maintaining a consistent pattern of truth-telling, and performing tangible acts of service to others, regardless of their faith or static categories of belonging.

Do We Worship the Same God?

We now turn to the “yes” side of the question: “Do we—one of us a Muslim and one a Christian—worship the same God?” This is a timeless question that has been explored throughout the ages. As we have already admitted, our views about God differ significantly. For example, the theological concept of the Incarnation (God becoming human) is a major point of contention between us. It is central to Christian theology but deeply contradicts core Muslim beliefs about the nature of God. Clearly, we have different ideas about who God is and what God is willing to do.¹⁵

Despite these differences, we firmly believe that we worship the same God, a perspective that is crucial to our dialogue and the respect we have for each other. We see each other as co-journeymen on the same path, even though our paths may look different. Our confidence is supported by a centered set view of the faith journey, which fosters respect for each other's spiritual path. We end up gladly supporting and edifying each other's faith journeys, even when we disagree.

To clarify this notion, let's consider some classic English sentences that describe qualities of the divine.

“God is great”¹⁶ is a universal Muslim confession, while “God is love”¹⁷ is a well-known Christian one. Do these sentences describe qualities of different gods? Is there a Muslim “great God” who is completely different from the Christian “loving God” described in the Bible? Christians often speak of God's greatness with deep sincerity, and many Muslims extol God's love while remaining authentically Muslim. We can assert that these statements describe the same being, even if the details emphasize different qualities.

The reason is that the subject of each sentence is the same: “God.” The differences appear in the predicate, where descriptive details highlight different aspects of God. In one case, the focus is on God's greatness and power; in the other, it is on God's love and affection.

Anglican cleric Michael Nazir-Ali, drawing on the thoughts of Christian Islamicist Kenneth Cragg, addresses this issue in the following way:

In ‘God-talk’, as far as Cragg is concerned, the subject is always the same but the predicates used of God may, and do, differ widely. In dialogue between Christians and Muslims, this becomes apparent when each party finds that it can affirm some of the attributes of God asserted by the other while disagreeing about others. Cragg admits that this disparity affects the subject, but that it is disparity regarding the one subject is, for him, obvious. The question here is: at what point does disparity in predicates used of apparently the same object lead to the recognition that the subject may not be the same? (1991, 19)¹⁸

¹⁵ We are reminded of the relatively recent case of Professor Larycia Hawkins and her departure from the Christian liberal arts institution Wheaton College (Wheaton, Illinois), owing to repercussions surrounding this very issue. See Dampier (2019) for a review of that case. For a contemporaneous critical analysis of it, see Volf (2015).

¹⁶ *Allāhu akbar*: اللهُ أَكْبَرُ.

¹⁷ *Theos agapē estin*: Θεός ἀγάπη ἐστίν.

¹⁸ Cragg, himself, says this: “Inasmuch as both Christian and Muslim faiths believe in one supreme sovereign Creator-God, they are obviously referring, when they speak of God under whatever terms, to the same Being. To suppose otherwise would be confusing. It is important to keep in mind that though apprehensions differ, their theme is the same. The differences, undoubtedly real, between the Muslim and the Christian understanding of God, are far-reaching and must be patiently studied. But it would be fatal to all our mutual tasks to doubt that one and the same God over all was the reality of both. Those who say that Allah is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” are right if they mean that God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of the Christian faith.

Nazir-Ali's last assertion is very illuminating. Each sentence shares the same subject, giving us a common focal point. From this starting point, we are invited (by God, we believe) to explore the variations each of the predicates suggest. If it becomes evident that the differing predicates require significant modifications to the base concept—the shared subject—then we might find ourselves focused on different goals.¹⁹ However, until that point, we must assume a common subject, as we are on a similar journey. Therefore, we wholeheartedly agree with the following humble statement of invitation and openness:

If we engage the matter by accepting one another's approaches to devotion as good-faith *attempts* to worship the one true God, even if some of us may consider one another's attempts to be ultimately misguided, then we can discuss the salient issues with dignity and respect. In the end, it is perhaps best to answer the question of whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God in terms more like "Well, I'm not sure. We both *desire* to worship the one true God and we both *claim* to be doing so. But our worship and our beliefs about God differ in significant ways, and this leaves us a lot to discuss. Let's start talking . . . (Saperstein, Love, & Cumming 2009, 184-185, emphasis in the original).

Of course, the two of us have been talking for some time, and we will continue to talk, exploring differing predicates—differing views about God—at length. But it is important to recognize that we have always started with the same subject. As we have explored our differences, we have tried to be careful not to be misled by wrong questions or by misguided assumptions. As Saperstein et al. imply, it is crucial to approach our conversation with the utmost humility, as such a stance provides us with the greatest opportunity for learning and for gaining rich insights from each other. This humility is conceptually funded by deeper understandings of the predicates the other embraces concerning who our partner believes God is.²⁰

They also raise an additional concern, pointing in a direction that seems vaguely familiar:

If there exists only one true God, and if [we] claim to worship that one God, then perhaps the question "Do Muslims and Christians (and Jews) worship the same God?" is not the right question at all. A more appropriate question might be, "Do Muslims and Christians (and Jews) all worship God truly?" Perhaps the substance of our discussions . . . should focus more on how we might more truly know and worship the one true God, rather than on whether we are all in practice actually doing so. (2009, 183)²¹

The source of the confusion of thought encountered here is that to say who God is necessarily goes beyond saying that God is. If we agree on the second, what we say relates to the same theme or subject, even though we may differ markedly as to the first. No faith or believer, of course, can say that God is without being involved to some degree in what God is. But unless there is radical inconsistency within the very concept of existence itself as applied to God—the sort of difference that does not obtain between Muslim and Christian—we are speaking of the same subject" (1985, 30).

¹⁹ R. Marston Speight puts it this way: "It seems clear that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Some Christians contest this affirmation, but no Muslims disagree with it. If we do not worship the same God, then we must find another name either for their God or our God. Allah, the word for God in the Qur'an, is the same word that is used by Arab Christians in their religious life. To say that we worship the same God does not mean that we share the same interpretations of the mystery of God's nature. Of course there are enormous differences of understanding" (2001, 108).

²⁰ For a chapter-length examination from one of us concerning the notion of humility and the role it plays, both from a theological as well as from a cultural anthropology perspective, see Backues (2017).

²¹ Speight offers these helpful insights: "The centrality and reality of the one true and living God is the basic rallying point for Christians and Muslims. Living daily as conscious and grateful recipients of the gifts of an Almighty and Gracious Creator, we have a scope for mutual understanding as broad as any human experience. What is more, we talk about God with many of the same words: Just, True, Beneficent, Wise, Powerful, Loving, Holy, Exalted, All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

We both believe in prophets who were God's instruments in human history to draw men and women from unbelief into the life of faith. History is taken seriously by our two religions since both faiths are founded on concrete historical events.

The place of Jesus differs enormously in the Muslim and the Christian systems, but the fact that he is known and respected in both is an important point of meeting" (2001, 113-114).

Note the question, “Do we both worship God truly?” This is obviously a centered set question, one that focuses not on the boundaries separating theological positions but, on the tangible, real-life acts of devotion that demonstrate the sincerity of a worshipper’s commitment. At its core, this question asks whether we are both facing the right direction.²² We believe our common focus should be on dedication to God and service to our neighbors—a center that keeps us moving together in solidarity. In doing so, we seek to exalt the same subject: the God of love who cares for us, the God of power who reaches out to humanity, especially to the poor and marginalized who face injustice and inequity.

An Anonymous Muslim and an Anonymous Christian in Conversation

Let us revisit the questions posed earlier, particularly our concerns with the term “kafir” (often translated “infidel” or “unbeliever”). Given our discussion, how should we now view each other? More specifically, how should we consider each other’s “eternal destiny”? To put it bluntly, what do we do with the word “kafir”—are either of us infidels?

Clearly, we do not believe this word is appropriate to describe either of us. We take delight in treating each other as persons of deep religious faith, a position that contradicts the usual connotation for “kafir.” While we differ in how we describe the divine, we have no doubt that we worship the same God. Neither of us are infidels; rather, we see each other as “fidels” (taken from the Latin word “fide” = “faith”).

Such a perspective aligns well with Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan’s view when he says that, from a Muslim perspective, the word “kafir”

has a strict normative sense; it defines those who, *with knowledge and forethought*, deny God and/or the truth of the last Revelation and the mission of Muhammad. It cannot be used to stigmatize or to insult and must be employed with the greatest caution, as *it is impossible to determine if a person who denies the existence of God has sufficient knowledge to assert as much, or if that person’s denial is the result of ignorance, in which case it is not conscious negation*. In addition, Revelation points to the relationship to be maintained with

those who negate religion, and who reject it in full knowledge. The formula is clear: “Unto you, your religion, and unto me, mine!” (109:6). The principle of freedom of conscience is inextricably linked to the basic requirement of justice for all, without distinction based on religious belief, skin color, or social status. Nor can it be an option to retreat behind the walls of one’s own community. (2017, 204, emphasis added)

Ramadan cautions against using the word too casually, for two reasons: (1) only God knows what is in a person’s heart, and (2) religious principles of justice require that others be free to believe as they choose.

Ramadan is not alone in this view. Many years ago, noted Islamic jurist Asaf A.A. Fyzee also warned against the cavalier use of this term. As he stated,

belief is a matter of conscience and this is the age which recognizes freedom of conscience in matters of faith. What may be said after proper analysis is that a certain person’s opinions are wrong, but not that “he is a *kafir*.” (Cragg & Speight 1979, 224)

Thus, we can conclude that the word “kafir” simply does not belong in our conversation and will not appear in any sort of work we do together in the future.

But we would like to take things a step further. Inspired by the views of noted Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, we believe we can view each other as “anonymous believers,” that is, within the context of our own specific religious traditions. This perspective is inviting and gracious; it does not arise from an academic concern for meticulously drawing boundaries, but it arises by way of the warm relationship we enjoy with each other, a bond that seeks to honor our shared dedication.

Thus, it might be helpful to unpack Rahner’s thinking a bit more. His approach was like ours: he embraced a pastoral concern for those who found themselves outside the realm of clear theological evidence about God. He recognized that excluding individuals who had received a garbled theological message was neither just, nor was it compassionate. Worse yet, such a perspective painted a picture of a coldhearted and harsh God, one that contradicted the image of God Rahner himself encountered in the

²² It is interesting that this raises a wonderful historic Muslim question: do we have our *qiblah*—the rightful direction of our prayer—oriented correctly?

biblical narrative.²³ Therefore, he believed that Christian theology must

account for the very large numbers of people, past and present, who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ . . . How are we to make sense of the existence of so much unbelief and what Rahner called “inculpable atheism” in the world? How do you situate Christianity within the larger context of a world in which two-thirds are non-Christian? To answer these complex questions Rahner comes up with the idea of the anonymous Christian. (Lane 2005, 95)

Or in his own words,

until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men [sic] as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason [sic] a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it. (1999, 293, emphasis in the original)

Broadening this principle brings significant clarity to our conversation. As mentioned earlier, we see each other as “anonymous believers,” recognizing the other’s faith position as deeply and honorably embraced. For Munjid, Backues can now be seen as an “anonymous Muslim”; for Backues, Munjid an “anonymous Christian.” This view postures the two of us as co-religionists, persons who respect each other’s spiritual journeys, trajectories centered on worship, on enhancing and edifying the common good, and towards a shared goal of honoring God in all the ways we know how.

This mutual respect allows us to pray, to work, to reason, and even to debate theology together, without denigrating the other’s faith, without questioning the other’s sincerity, or without diminishing the quality of the other’s insights. In short, neither of us ends up “kafir-ized” (an awkward neologism, we know). This is the foundational stance that underpins all of our interaction.

As somewhat of a punctuation to all we have just explored, we would like to bring our analysis to a close by having a close look at a deeply touching and very relevant human story. In much that we have explored above, we have been turning over in our minds ideas and concepts. But, as both of us know intimately, the thoughts explored here have real, existential, human implications. So, let us turn to a case study of sorts, a real-life, moving example that weaves together several of the strands that we have just discussed above.

²³ There is a reliable reading of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans that comports with this. Such a reading turns significantly upon whether a comma is included in Romans 1:18.

Note these two variant translations of verse 18, with significant punctuation differences on display.

1. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” (NIV)
2. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” (NRSV)

A comma appears in option 1., causing the word “all” to modify “people.” In this reading, all people (inclusive in scope) are described as “ungodly” and “wicked,” at least to some degree. This results in God’s wrath being directed toward all of humanity, universally. Such a reading aligns well with the particularity position as described above.

In contrast, no comma appears in option 2. Because of this, the word “all” modifies “ungodliness and wickedness,” as opposed to “people,” which is the case in the NIV translation (“people” in the NIV is rendered “those” in the NRSV). This reading limits the scope of persons referred to, with God’s wrath directed, *not* toward everyone, but *only* toward “all ungodliness and wickedness” of “those [persons] who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” This way of glossing things seems similar to how Rahner saw things and—once again—it aligns best with the generality position above.

Which one is correct given the biblical text? We must first realize that Koine Greek contains no punctuation; the way it appears in our English versions is the product of an editorial—read, an “interpretive”—decision. We contend that—in this epistle—the second option here comports best with the flow of Paul’s argument, especially as one traces the flow of thought on display in the next two chapters (Romans 2-3).

A Centered Set Life of Religious Service; Quietly Lived and Tragically Cut Short

On March 6th, 2011, Rehab El-Buri passed away from cancer at the tender age of 26. Though we did not know her personally, it is clear she was an exceptional young woman. A devout Islamic activist, Rehab touched many lives and dedicated her short years to serving others tirelessly. This seemed to be the testimony of all who did know her.

After graduating from the University of Missouri's celebrated journalism program in 2007, Rehab—newly married—secured an entry-level desk assistant position at ABC News. Her hard work and her dedication soon paid off as she advanced within the company. Rehab eventually joined the ABC News Investigative Unit (ABC News Investigative Team, 2011), where her ability to uncover stories of the overlooked earned her recognition from the network.

In 2008, Rehab was instrumental in developing a 20/20 report that investigated how some high-ranking international diplomats in the U.S. would abuse and exploit the domestic workers brought with them from their home countries. The most challenging aspect of this report was finding workers from poor and underprivileged backgrounds who were willing to speak out against their powerful employers.

"Rehab combined a strong drive to uncover the facts with a calm and reassuring presence," said producer Joseph Rhee. "This proved invaluable in finding a way to crack this difficult story."

Rehab was able to contact a young Indonesian woman named Siti Aisah who worked for the then-ambassador to the United Nations from Qatar. Rehab gained Aisah's trust, meeting her on weekends and gaining permission to shoot footage of Aisah on her own with a small video camera. When Aisah finally spoke on-camera to ABC News, she told a powerful and heart-wrenching account of being treated harshly by the extremely wealthy and privileged family of the ambassador. (2011)

In short, Rehab was a person "committed to reporting on the plight of those who could not speak out on their own" (2011), a goal she fulfilled with style and effectiveness. "Rehab was wise beyond her years

and brought important insights to all of ABC News," said Brian Ross, chief investigative correspondent" (2011).

But then came her diagnosis: malignant melanoma. Just two short years later, she would be gone.

Even during her treatment—enduring grueling chemotherapy, surgeries, and radiation therapy—Rehab stayed focused on the needs of others. While lying in the hospital,

despite her own illness, she raised over \$20,000 through a bake sale for a friend who needed an operation. And when she learned from a chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering hospital, where she was treated, that a program for pediatric patients was short on funding, she snapped into action.

"Rehab, completely exhausted, with tubes coming out of her chest and IVs running into every possible vein, looked up at him and promised she would get him the money," her husband, Zaied Abbassi, said. "Less than three weeks later, she handed him a check for \$1500." The money ensured the program would be funded for not only one year, but two.

"She said she would do something, and she did it," Abbassi said. (2011)

Those who knew Rehab noted that her passion for helping others, often at the expense of her own comfort, was driven by her faith in God. As a devout Muslim who had worn a hijab since childhood, Rehab's commitment to her beliefs was evident. This was especially clear in her blog entries written just after her diagnosis, at a time when she realized she might not survive. The words she penned are powerful and moving.

I know I ended my last post pretty abruptly. At the time I was writing it, going through the play by play was difficult.

It took me about three days to accept my death. On the first day, as you read, my mind was in chaos. On the second day, I was numb. And on the third day, my husband and mother began talking sense to me, and I finally came to some important realizations:

1. We are all going to die. The people who took the news of my disease calmly and those who panicked—they are going to die one day too.

Death is one of the few realities we can be certain of in this life, and yet we somehow slip into thinking that we are exempt.

2. We live this life for the next. I was living my life as a Muslim . . . praying and fasting, but I had somehow allowed my real goal in life to be swallowed by buying salad plates for my next dinner party, and trying to get free shipping on my next jcrew [sic] order, and finding pillows that popped against my creme sofa. In between being a consumer and entertaining myself to death, I let what really matters in my life slip away from me. If I was truly living my life for the Hereafter, I should not be so fearful of the future I had created for myself. The Quran says, “And this life of the world is nothing but a sport and a play; and as for the next abode, that most surely is the life—did they but know!” [29.64]

3. I am in the same boat as everyone else. None of us are given any guarantees in life. Our health, our wealth, and our families are trusts given to us by Allah—and they are His to take when He, in his infinite wisdom, deems fit. We all claim to believe this, but in practice we often falter. I don’t know why I thought I could push the thought of death out of my mind for at least a good 30 or 40 years. Allah (SWT) could claim any of us at any time. I am in the same boat as everyone else—I have no idea when my time is, but I should try to live everyday as if it is my last.

4. Each day is a gift. Receiving this wake up [sic] call is such a blessing in that each day Allah grants me is an opportunity to do some more good and try to make up for some of the mistakes I made in the past. For some reason, the mornings are usually a little rough for me. I think it’s just waking up from my dreams and realizing that I still have to live with this disease. But every morning I try to tell myself, “Alhamdulillah, I feel good today, what good can I do today?”

These realizations, and the support of my mother, husband, his mother, my sisters, his sisters, my father, his father, my friends, and my community have helped me not merely cope with what I’m going through, but actually seek the reward of going through this trial, and try to sincerely accept what Allah wills for me. (IslamicSG Networks 2011)

Soon after this, Rehab El-Buri was gone, leaving behind these poignant reflections, likely shared beyond her blog, perhaps repeated in prayer to her God up until the very day she died.

Conclusion

So, it is appropriate for us to now ask: what did God do with Rehab? What did God do with her prayers? She undeniably lived a good and exceptional life, as evidenced by the testimonies of her friends and acquaintances, and by her own words in her final months. However, as we have seen, both Islam and Christianity teach that no one can earn God’s favor solely through merit. Both faiths agree that if Rehab were to receive God’s welcome, it would be on the basis of divine mercy, that is, it would be a reflection and outpouring of God’s unmerited compassion. Rehab’s own writings confirm that she believed this, too.

So, we must ask ourselves: how merciful do we think God is? How merciful can God be? Perhaps most importantly, how merciful do we think God *should* be? Would a loving God, after receiving sincere, heartfelt prayers like the ones we heard coming from Rehab, turn her away because she unfortunately belonged to the wrong faith? If our God is bounded-set in nature, what does that say about how we understand God’s mercy? How happy are we that the mercy and compassion of God can be that bounded, too? In what real ways can we call a God merciful if that means God must reject someone like Rehab, if God is bound not to hear her prayers?

As for the two of us, we believe God heard Rehab’s cries, we believe God knew her heart, we believe God was moved by her plight, we believe God blessed her for her service, and we believe God welcomed her into divine fellowship, offering final healing in response to her pain and her consistent devotion. Our discussion above justifies why we can embrace such a belief.

However, this is not just an intellectual exercise. As persons who long for justice and fairness, we need to believe in a just and a fair God, a compassionate and a caring God, a God worthy of our worship. As the Muslim confession affirms, we seek a “God who is great”—Allāhu akbar: اللهُ أَكْبَرُ—a God focused on centered-sets, a God who welcomes with compassion those who approach with tender and open hearts, individuals who are devoted and centered on worship of God. We believe we know such a God, and we

believe our common conviction strengthens the bond of our shared faith.

Thus, we choose now to faithfully pray together in the same direction, side-by-side.

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NEWS & OPINIONS

On Defining “Religion” in “Religious” vs. “Secular” Engagement

Robert Guy McKee

In this article, I start with an anecdote and two literature notes, I comment on each, then I explain what the article is about and proceed with its substance.¹

Actually, It's All *Religion!* (Seriously.)

The anecdote is about a remark made to me and a fellow student back when I was finishing my graduate work in anthropology at the University of Rochester.² I was with this student in the department lounge talking about a paper I had written for a theory seminar a couple or so years before. The paper was a Genesis prologue analysis; the analysis has prologue myth providing believers with an epistemological charter; the charter enjoins humankind to construct, to God's glory, knowledge of the creation, while respecting, again to God's glory, as his untouchable domain, knowledge of good and evil. Obeying the charter, believers act virtuously in the world based on revealed moral knowledge of the one living, righteous, eternal God, even as they fulfill its charge to develop subjective, changeable scientific knowledge of a changing creation.

The professor for whom I had written the paper happened to be in the lounge at the time, within easy earshot. At my mention of some of the paper's God-related material, she interjected dismissively (though not unkindly), “It's all politics.”³

Comment: Yes, there is a political dimension to our actions and a politics of meaning, including where interpreting biblical texts and defining words like “religion” and “secular” are concerned. But no, it is not *all* politics; *were* it so, “it's all politics” would itself be disqualified as mere politics. If anything, it's all *religion*, at least as I and some others define religion.

The first literature note concerns the diffusion research term “pro-innovation bias.” This is a term I have thought about each of the last several years as I have used Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (2003) in a culture change course that I teach. According to Rogers, “The *pro-innovation bias* is the implication in diffusion research that an innovation should be diffused and adopted by all members of a social system, that it should be diffused more rapidly, and that the innovation should be neither re-invented nor rejected.” Seldom stated plainly, just “assumed and implied,” Rogers calls this bias “one of the most

¹ Reprinted with permission from Robert Guy McKee's *Destination: Christian Anthropology*, <https://leanpub.com/destinationchristiananthropology>, 2022, ISBN 979-8-9862495-1-3, chapter 4; with a few minor copy edits, removal of the boxes around the two asides, and the addition of an explanatory sentence before the first such. Conference paper version read October 13, 2018, at the Evangelical Missiological Society's national conference at Dallas International University, Dallas, TX, USA.

² The university's administration announced at the end of 1994 that it was cutting anthropology from among its graduate programs; students already enrolled could complete their degrees. The university remains today with a vibrant undergraduate program.

³ To my professor's great credit, I would say, her personal take on my paper's analysis did not influence adversely the grade she gave me for the paper (A), even though I handed it in about two years late, from the middle of a second term with SIL International in northeastern Zaire, having been allowed an Incomplete (I) to finish it.

serious shortcomings of diffusion research” (2003, 106, italics in the original).

Ironically, Rogers himself appears guilty of this bias, in a part of the book where he apologizes halfheartedly for terming “laggard” the adopter category of social-system traditionalists. “Laggards” are either the last of a system’s members to adopt an innovation, or, worse yet, ones who never adopt. While Rogers acknowledges that “‘laggard’ might sound like a bad name,” and that it “carries an invidious distinction (in much the same way that ‘lower class’ is a negative nomenclature),” he yet protests⁴ that any other term would soon sound similarly negative, and he appears to suggest that something must be at fault for “laggards” being last to adopt or rejecting (ibid., 284-285). Also, while he does consider a number of ways by which pro-innovation bias might be overcome (ibid., 112-117), none approaches anything like a flipping of adopter-category labels such that “laggards” become “faithfuls” and “innovators” are rebranded “apostates.”

Comment (in question form): Does use of the term “laggard” in diffusion research remind anyone else of use of the term “religious” in “secular” vs. “religious” engagement in Western culture?

The second literature note I might have made about Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* (1980), published by Random House; I make it instead about Berenstain & Berenstain’s *The Bears’ Nature Guide* (1975), again by Random House. An image in the top-right corner of the book’s cover tells us that it is part of the Bear Facts Library series, for children ages 3 to 9; one of the book’s characters, Actual Factual Bear, appears to lend scientific authority to the book’s message. Largely, that message pretends to answer factually the question, “What is nature?”; a summary answer ten pages into the book reads, “Nature is every person, thing, and

place / here on Earth and out in space. // Nature’s the sun, the moon, the stars. / It’s faraway planets like Venus and Mars. // It’s the mountains, the valleys, the shore, the sea. / Nature is you! Nature is me! // It’s all that IS or WAS or EVER WILL BE! // And that’s a lot to talk about on just one nature walkabout” (1975, 10-11).

Comment (again in question form): Is this book’s exclamation concerning nature in fact/indeed factual, with authority of nonreligious science behind it, or is it, rather, naturalistic (not natural) science and philosophy for children ages 3 to 9?

What this article is about, cutting to the chase, is what “religion” is about—how best to define it; then, it is also about how this affects how we see “religious” vs. “secular” engagement as we continue doing mission and evangelism in a “secularizing” world. Regarding what religion is about, I think the key question is, Who is high king in the realm of value—King with a capital ‘k’? ⁵ Bertrand Russell saw humankind as high king/monarch—as “the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value” (1957, 55), with no God at all likely in the picture; the Christian bible, by the Genesis prologue’s dominion mandate,⁶ does have the one living God, the “ultimate Fact” (Lewis 1978, 95), setting humankind as “ruler over the works of [God’s] hands” (Psalm 8:6), but only as subordinate to himself as “Supreme Ruler” (Pearcey 2005, 47). How I have come to define religion, as part of my own still-developing Christian anthropology, I think I can best explain by looking at both viewpoints—Russell’s and the Christian-biblical. I define it, in any case, as created humankind’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value, assuming the Christian-biblical God as high king.⁷ From there, still including attention to Russell’s view of value, I suggest it follows that “religious” vs. “secular”

⁴ It is indeed “protest” as I read Rogers, consistent with his admitting guilt of the bias.

⁵ This reminds me, in the outworking of a person’s life, of “the Dominant”—the dominant function of an utterance or text—of Prague School multifunctional linguistics. Whatever is the Dominant leads in structuring the utterance; other functions contribute in lesser ways, perhaps not at all. Where the present paper’s “King” in the realm of value is concerned, what is structured is the subordinate king’s/monarch’s life.

⁶ Also known as the cultural mandate (Pearcey 2005, 48-49, Waltke 2007, 220-221), the Adamic mandate, and by other terms—e.g., the first great commission (vis-à-vis the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20) and the primeval mandate or commission (Morris 1984, 41-46). I long preferred “cultural mandate,” probably given that I am a sociocultural anthropologist; as I have been writing the present paper, I have changed my preference to “dominion mandate,” given that it concerns dominion more broadly than it does culture, since I think our relationship with God-as-Supreme-Ruler is more fundamental than our cultures as products of the mandate.

⁷ See McKee (2012, 2014) for earlier statements of the same, contextualized differently than in the present paper; and yet earlier is McKee (1998), which was the initial conference presentation of what has remained the core of my Genesis prologue analysis.

engagement—a type, by the way, of which mission and evangelism in a secularizing world is a token—is normally most insightfully seen with “secular” recognized as with the sense, not of *nonreligious*, but rather of *otherwise religious*. Concluding, I suggest that, as we do mission and evangelism in an increasingly otherwise-religious world, we help ourselves by developing Christian anthropology as one of our means to understand it.

On Humankind as Monarchs in the Realm of Value

First, then, concerning humankind as monarchs in the realm of value: Having come to this view myself from study of the Genesis prologue and the dominion mandate, I happened on a variant of it in something by Bertrand Russell. Russell was a British aristocrat widely renowned as a humanist, logician, philosopher of mathematics, writer, and champion of unfettered science and freethinking against dogmatic religion.⁸ Although “best known for his work in mathematical logic and analytic philosophy,” he “made significant contributions to a broad range of other subjects, including ethics, politics, educational theory, the history of ideas and religious studies.”⁹ As if that were not enough, he was “involved, often passionately, in numerous social and political controversies of his time,” he was “a gadfly for improving the lives of men and women,”¹⁰ and he was awarded the 1950 Nobel Prize in Literature “in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought.”¹¹

Important to note is that Russell’s opposition to dogmatic religion was not, despite some appearance, to *all* religion. It was to *creedal* religion, definitely to “all the great religions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism” (1957, v); it was *not* to what he called “the free man’s worship” of what he deemed the best ideals of humankind’s own creation. That free man’s worship, Russell’s own *noncreedal* religion, he described in an eponymously entitled essay chockful of undisguisedly religious language.¹² I quote just one passage in illustration:

When we have realized that power is largely bad, that man, with his knowledge of good and evil, is but a helpless atom in a world which has no such knowledge, the choice is again presented to us: Shall we worship force, or shall we worship goodness? Shall our God exist and be evil, or shall he be recognized as the creation of our own conscience? (1957, 109)

The problem of appearance that I mention—that Russell was opposed to *all* religion, which he certainly was not—concerns how Russell’s rationalism, agnosticism-cum-atheism,¹³ championing of science, renown as a logician, *together with* his outspoken opposition to *creedal* religion—has contributed to what I see as the naïve Western cultural impression that Russell was quintessentially secular in that word’s sense of strictly nonreligious—i.e., without *any* religion. (And I think the problem extends well beyond Russell, to include other such highly culturally-influential scholars as Richard Dawkins and the late Stephen Hawking, to mention just two.¹⁴)

⁸ See, among other sources consulted on Russell’s life, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertrand-Russell>, accessed March 7, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertrand_Russell, accessed March 7, 2018, and Ronald W. Clark’s *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976).

⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/russell/>, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹⁰ <https://users.drew.edu/jlenz/brs-about-br.html>, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹¹ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1950/, accessed September 24, 2020.

¹² See Russell’s “A Free Man’s Worship” (1957, 104-116).

¹³ For an instructive short piece on Russell the rationalist, philosophical agnostic, and practical atheist, see http://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id_6.php, accessed March 24, 2018.

¹⁴ See Dawkins (2008, 298-308) concerning this biologist’s idea of “the manifest phenomenon of *Zeitgeist* progression,” by which he thinks enlightened progressives like himself can discern ever-changing, naturalistic good and evil apart from religion, God, or scripture (“It is probably not a single force like gravity, but a complex interplay of disparate forces like the one that propels

A parenthesis, now (for interest's sake), along with a photo.

Finding Bertrand Russell on Value

I think it interesting, even providential, how I first wound up reading anything by Bertrand Russell. During my PhD program at Rochester, while proceeding many scores of times by the same elevator-assisted route into the bowels (or, less often, one of the upper floors) of Rush Rhees Library for research and/or study, it so happened that I first had to pass through some first-floor stacks that contained, on my left, a very long stretch of Russell's books. As I did so, I just kept thinking that he was such a well-known anti-Christian philosopher, I had to know something of what he had written. That led to my eventually buying a copy of his *Why I Am Not a Christian*, in which book's essays I found Russell on value, Russell on the "free" man's worship (my dismissive-of-the-idea quotes), Russell on other subjects.

Graven in blocks of the wall of Rush Rhees Library is a statement of progressive humanism that certainly fits better with the University of Rochester's motto *Meliora* "(Ever) better" than with Russell's view of physical value. What the basis is for the former's hopeful future in the Reality that includes at least the physical-material universe (Sagan's cosmos; the Bears' nature), the graven statement does not say.

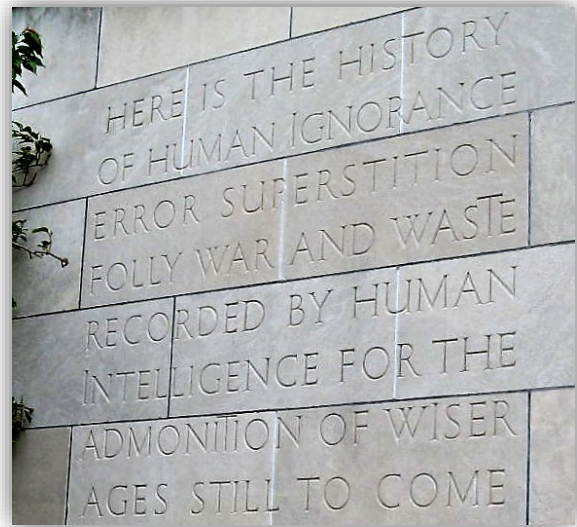


Photo 1

Statement of progressive humanism engraved on a section of wall of the University of Rochester's Rush Rhees Library, exemplifying the university's motto *Meliora* (Latin "(Ever) better").

To return to the main thread: In *Why I Am Not a Christian* (one of the last of Russell's over 70 books), in an essay entitled "What I Believe," Russell contrasted what he called the philosophies of nature and value. In the philosophy of nature, he said, "Undoubtedly we [humankind] are part of nature, which has produced our desires, our hopes and fears, in accordance with laws the physicist is beginning to discover"; "we are subordinated to nature, the outcome of natural laws, and their victims in the long run" (1957, 55). Thus, among the things he said we do not control are, that we all die, our bodies rot, and we, including our egos, are entirely annihilated.¹⁵ By

Moore's Law, describing the exponential increase in computer power"). See then also, without fail, Plantinga (2011, *passim*) for this philosopher's reasoned disdain of Dawkins' generally sophomoric philosophizing.

See, concerning Hawking, a later note.

Another interesting example besides Dawkins and Hawking: Philip Goff is a philosopher who, seemingly determined, like Dawkins, to ground rational morality on something other than God, espouses seriously, at a European university, what he calls agentive cosmopsychism (see <https://aeon.co/essays/cosmopsychism-explains-why-the-universe-is-fine-tuned-for-life>, accessed February 9, 2018).

¹⁵ Russell did not believe in either God or immortality, "the central dogmas of the Christian religion," for what he alleged their lack of any scientific support (1957, 50). It was the religious, the superstitious, who feared death; Russell, a person of science, though old as he was writing the essay concerned, and though loving life, "should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of

contrast, in the philosophy of value, Russell rather rejoiced at what he saw as an important difference, given that there were some “facts on or near the surface of the earth that we can, to some extent, mold to suit our desires”:

[I]n the philosophy of value the situation is reversed [from what it is in the philosophy of nature]. Nature is only a part of what we can imagine; everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in the world of value nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than nature. In the world of values, nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad, deserving of neither admiration nor censure. It is we who create value and our desires which confer value. In this realm we are kings, and we debase our kingship if we bow down to nature. It is for us to determine the good life, not for nature—not even for nature personified as God. (1957, 55-56)

As to Russell’s response to the question of who is high king/monarch in the realm of value, I think it remarkably transparent here. Whatever anything is or is not in nature, it is something that we, humankind, monarchs in the realm of value, can imagine and valorize however we individually¹⁶ desire, with nothing in the universe above or outside us to instruct us how rationally to do so. Thus, to take good and evil as an example (our feelings and beliefs on these, Russell wrote in another essay, “are, like everything else about us, natural facts, developed in the struggle for existence” [1957, 92]): We first understand or imagine good and evil as we would like, according to our desires; we then appraise good and evil, again according to our desires, with “no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong,” since “we are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of

value,” “we who create value and our desires which confer value,” since “in this realm we are kings.” In other words, summing up Russell’s thought here, what we do with the value of anything and everything, real or imagined, is entirely up to us. “It is for us to determine the good life,” not for anything or anyone else, period (1957, 55-56).

(Awkward pause. I think Russell’s thought in “What I Believe” particularly sad from this point, since he proceeds to try to persuade contrary-thinking monarchs in the realm of value—ones happy to honor racism and dishonor philanthropy, perhaps, according to *their* regal, natural desires—of *his* view of the good life, recognizing he cannot argue logically for it. Russell’s good life, by the way—“*one inspired by love and guided by knowledge*” [1957, 56, italics in the original]—interestingly resembles, albeit superficially, some of Christianity.)

Of obvious interest here is how Russell’s idea—that we, humankind, are *absolute* monarchs in the realm of value—compares with a similar, yet very different, Christian-biblical idea—viz., that we are *subordinate* monarchs in this realm, under the God who made us and to whom we are therefore responsible for our lives.¹⁷ This is part of the dominion mandate, according to which Genesis 1:28, in context,¹⁸ has God making humankind, created in his image and thus capable of dominion, ruler¹⁹ under him of the creation. By my own analysis, prologue acts of both *calling* (in the sense of *naming*) and *eating* symbolize exercise of dominion. God brings the animals to Adam for Adam to name as he would, and Adam names them (Genesis 2:19-20). This is rational science, quintessentially, and humankind’s domain. Thereby, humankind is to construct, to God’s glory, what is changeable, changing, susceptible-to-paradigm-shifts, subjective knowledge of the creation. This includes constructing our cultures. By contrast, it is God who calls the light “day” and the darkness “night” (Genesis 1:5). This concerns rational morality—objective knowledge of good and evil,

annihilation” (1957, 54). (Russell understood only the Catholics, no longer the Protestants, as with the doctrine of hell, as opposed to annihilation.)

¹⁶ Although I do not see Russell add “individually” to “we” anywhere that he writes in this vein, I do not think, had this not been his meaning, that he would have expended the effort he does in “What I Believe” trying to persuade others to share his view of the good life (1957:56-63, especially).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Psalm 100:3.

¹⁸ The context is Genesis 1-2, most nearly, but extends to include the whole of Scripture, and definitely Revelation 21-22.

¹⁹ Or master, lord, king, or yet another gloss, depending on the translation preferred.

grounded in the Creator God's eternal, righteous nature, and God's inviolable domain. And thus the prophet Isaiah says, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20).²⁰ The same message is communicated with acts of eating, as God gives humankind created, seed-bearing plants to eat—"every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit"—while he forbids them only the fruit of the self-existent, *sui generis*, centrally-located tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When humankind ate of the forbidden fruit, they thereby rebelliously asserted moral autonomy, deciding to determine good and evil for themselves, thus presuming to be monarchs over God's domain in a self-idolatry that Wright (2006) identifies as at the root of all other idolatry.²¹



Photo 2

The center of Geneva's Reformation Wall, where it's all religion—including, e.g., memorializing four key Protestant reformers, and/or also vandalizing the monument (in which latter regard, see <https://evangelicalfocus.com/cities/4602/vandalism-against-the-wall-of-the-reformers-in-geneva>).

In sum, we humankind, biblically, are kings and queens in Narnia, so to speak, under Aslan as King/high king.²² We are mandated to exercise lordship over the creation that duly, worshipfully respects God's lordship over us. We are *not* Russell's "ultimate and irrefutable" kings/monarchs, in a realm of subjective value only, where we know good and evil no differently at base—by our naturally-produced desires—than we know anything else, yet where we can also somehow, according to Russell, recognize the best ideals of human creation and think it proper to worship them.

Before saying a bit more about my definition of religion, let me say that it can help me to think of Russell's philosophy of nature as that of *homo sapiens*—of natural, biological, strictly nonreligious humankind—and of his philosophy of value as that of *homo religiosus*—of inherently, inveterately religious humankind, the species rather than just however many (or few) creedally-religious members of it. Thus, given Russell's philosophy of value, I think he may have agreed with my definition's idea that what makes humankind religious, creedally or otherwise, is our exercise of either autonomous or subordinate kingship in the realm of value. In any case, given that both philosophies consist of logically related thoughts soon to be understood completely, by Russell's account, as the natural facts they are (1957, 48-50, 54-55), I do not find Russell on value persuasive at base. Any philosophy or science that has all thought, logical and scientific included, as determined natural fact—as just another part of "everything else about us" (1957, 92), with nature all there is, was, or ever will be, remember?—any such is not philosophy or science I can trust. Thoughts that are simply natural facts cannot argue rationally with other such thoughts; both simply are.²³

²⁰ The article's Scripture quotations are from the 1984 New International Version.

²¹ Wright (2006, 64). Wright is an Anglican theologian.

²² The reference is to Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy Pevensie as "Kings and Queens in Narnia," in C. S. Lewis's *The Narnia Chronicles* (e.g., Lewis 1970:178-186).

²³ Hawking and his champions appear to be (or have been) blind to this problem with his thinking. Concerning his last book, published posthumously, an internationally-shared CNN article builds him up as a scientist ("the celebrated physicist Stephen Hawking," "considered one of the most brilliant scientists of his generation," "his family and colleagues finished [his last book] with the help of his vast personal archives"), reports his conclusion that there is no God—"that everything can be explained another way, by the laws of nature," and provides evidence of his value judgments on such diverse matters as going into the future blindly, "using advances in technology for the good of ordinary people," the global revolt against experts, scientists included, and things that divide us—e.g., Brexit and Donald Trump (see <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/there-is-no-god-says-stephen-hawking-in-final>).

More on My Definition of Religion

My definition of religion—again, I define it as created humanity’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value—I now say just a bit more about, in three points. First, it is of the same “ontological commitment” or “ultimate concern” type as the definitions of non-anthropologists Fred Welbourn (religious studies), Paul Tillich (theology), and Herman Dooyeweerd (philosophy), as treated briefly in Hexham (2011, 21-24). The type says, in effect, that it’s all *religion* (not politics, economics, or whatever else)—that one’s religion “involves one’s entire way of life,” that it “should be viewed in terms of each person’s ontological commitments, what really motivates them in their day-to-day lives, rather than in terms of explicit religiosity.”²⁴ What Hexham says of the ontological understanding of religion, from Welbourn through Edward Bailey on “implicit religion” (which, interestingly enough, he first called “secular religion”), satisfies me that a person and a community’s ontological commitments can indeed be studied and discovered—and, to boot, that ethnographic research methods are eminently suited to the task.²⁵ This last I say in answer to criticism that definitions of the ontological-commitment type, vague as they are, are of no value to scholars (since, if it is

indeed all religion, how in the world do we even begin to study it?²⁶).

Second, I see my definition as complementing, not improving on, that which Henry Van Til gives in *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (1959). This definition reads as follows:

Religion is the inescapable covenantal relationship between God as Lord and his image-bearer, man. This relation follows from that other basic one of Creator and creature, and rests upon the faithfulness of God to the covenant which he ordained as constituting the religious relationship. This relationship extends to the whole of life; it is all-permeating; it radiates from its center in the heart out to every area on the periphery of man’s existence.²⁷

Van Til’s definition spells out the core of our relationship of subordinate dominion—that it is to God as Creator and Lord, that it therefore permeates our whole lives, that God’s faithfulness to the covenant that constitutes it means we cannot escape it. Understandably for its title, Van Til (1959) has a related definition of culture, according to which culture is mandate-grounded, expressive of religion (i.e., it does not see religion as a part of culture, but rather religion as what produces culture), and both activity and the result thereof (i.e., culture is both process and product).²⁸

[book-215410/](#), accessed October 17, 2018). Everything, then—all of Hawking’s scientific thinking and value judgments included—would be entirely explicable by laws of nature, just more natural facts, just something that eventually happened.

²⁴ Hexham (2011, 21, 22). The latter quote is Hexham expressing Welbourn’s view; the former, Hexham attributes to Welbourn and others.

²⁵ Hexham (2011, 21-26). E.g., in an explanation that reminds me of common ethnographic research practice, Hexham says,

By [“implicit religion,” Bailey (religious studies)] means the actual practices and beliefs of people as discovered by others through careful observation of their actions and not simply by taking their words at face value. Bailey argues that it is important to observe what people actually do, not simply analyze what they say. By observing their actions, the way they live, he claims, it is possible to get at the nature of people’s actual ontological commitments, that is, to detect their “implicit religion” (2011, 26).

²⁶ Hexham (2011, 22) I credit here for noting this criticism.

²⁷ Van Til (1959, 37). Henry Van Til, fifteen years part of the theology faculty of Calvin College, was a nephew of the better-known Westminster Seminary professor Cornelius Van Til.

²⁸ Eminently worth quoting in full, and stuck in the present note only for the read/presented paper’s required brevity, Van Til’s (1959) definition of culture reads,

[Culture is] that activity of man, the image-bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it. The term is also applied to the result of such activity, namely, the secondary environment which has been superimposed upon nature by man’s creative effort.

Third, one of my definition's entailments is that all normal²⁹ people are religious, whether creedally or otherwise; *none* is secular in this word's strictly nonreligious sense.³⁰ This is because all normal people exercise constantly their dominion in the realm of value, whether or not consciously, whether or not worshipfully toward any recognized god. To take just one example: All normal people are constantly making judgments of fair vs. unfair, right vs. wrong—we are all incurable moralizers.³¹ Thus, not even “freethinkers” like Russell are or could ever normally be without religion, even if they have judged that, in all probability, there is no God or anything else supernatural/mystical there, only products of our imagination.

Thus, given that all normal people are religious, I suggest that “religious” vs. “secular” engagement be recognized for what it most always is in fact—religious vs. *otherwise religious* engagement. On the one hand, this tears off the “secular” side's political mask, in what seems to be increasingly, in our day, heated, highly irrational, values-related *conflict* rather than calmer, more rational, values-related engagement. On the other hand, I think it also reveals the extent to which the “religious” vs. “secular” framing of the engagement, in today's First World certainly, has been guilty of secular bias, with “religious” pigeonholed and condemned as formal, institutional, creedal, illogical, anti-science, anti-freethinking, and superstitious—while “secular” is allowed to skate for the otherwise religious

it actually is, behind a mask of such dictionary senses as “not spiritual: of or relating to the *physical* world and *not* the spiritual world” (italics added), “not religious,” and “not concerned with religion or the church.”³² To recognize here is that the two sides, “religious” and “otherwise religious,” are definitely *equally* religious, since their members (together equaling all normal people) are both monarchs in the realm of value. Clearly there are other ways to call the two sides of the engagement—e.g., subordinate vs. autonomous religion, religion vs. self-idolatry, true vs. apostate religion; but to maintain that secular religion is somehow *less* religious, or *scientifically* religious, or *more rationally* religious, is so much political poppycock.

Conclusion

Concluding now, let me suggest what is for me a further implication of my definition of religion—viz., that it makes sense for Christian anthropologists to push ahead with the development of Christian anthropology, for the help I think this promises toward understanding the “otherwise religious” of today's secularizing world. Judging from the title of a recent edited volume in the anthropology of religion, *Secularisms in a Postsecular Age? Religiosities and*

Culture, then, is not a peripheral concern, but of the very essence of life. It is an expression of man's essential being as created in the image of God, and since man is essentially a religious being, it is expressive of his relationship to God, that is, of his religion (1959, 7).

The result/product part of Van Til's definition strikes me as intentionally close to some of those of the section of Kroeber & Kluckhohn's (1963) definitions that emphasize culture as a product or artifact (1963, 125-130)—e.g., on page 128, Kluckhohn's own definition from his *Mirror for Man* (1949): “[C]ulture may be regarded as that part of the environment that is the creation of man” (1949, 20). Van Til (1959) later provides another, more-mandate-focused definition of culture: “Culture, then, is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God” (1959, 29-30).

²⁹ I think necessary, in this regard, the assumption of a certain normal, this in the sense of physically, healthily, developmentally normal, having normal brain capacity and function, etc. While this definition of “normal” may not be as exact as some would like, I think it adequate to my purpose here.

³⁰ The word “secular” has other, more recent dictionary senses in English than “not religious,” with each deriving from a stage in its etymology (see, e.g., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>, accessed February 22, 2018; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-do-secular-atheist-agnostic-mean>, accessed February 22, 2018).

³¹ See, in this regard, Lewis (1960:15-39).

³² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>, accessed February 22, 2018, with the first two senses from a definition for English language learners and the third from one for kids/students; and see again, also, among many others with similar data, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-do-secular-atheist-agnostic-mean>, accessed February 22, 2018.

Subjectivities in Comparative Perspective (2017),³³ there is a plurality of differing “otherwise religious” to be understood. We can leave these to non-Christian anthropologists to study for us; we can study them ourselves using non-Christian anthropologies, among them Christian-perspective anthropology as described in Howell & Paris (2011, 243); or, we can trust that Christian anthropology, beginning as it does from a Christian-biblical theoretical base, promises the greatest return on the investment concerned. While I cannot develop an argument for this here, I do venture four remarks:

First, the challenges of mission and evangelism in a secularizing world may relate more to “seculars” who deny they are religious³⁴ than to ones who aptly recognize themselves as less formally, non-creedally religious. In either case, my sense is that, in missional engagement with educated “seculars,” solidly, avowedly Christian-anthropological reasoning will be seen as the most honest approach for Christians to take, and also prove the most powerful.

Second, we have some courageous, trailblazing colleagues at Eastern University, in their MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology, to whom I think we owe support in this regard.

Third, having thought about this some as I have taught introductory-level cultural anthropology using first a secular, then a Christian-perspective text, I can hardly wait to see the structure and contents of the first intro-level *Christian anthropology* text, in which humankind’s religious constructs continue to be treated as part of culture, even in one or two of the book’s later chapters, but in which religion as defined by such as Van Til and myself appears up front as responsible for all of culture. If I ever write such a text, another of its differences from a normal/run-of-the-mill secular text will be a chapter entitled “Marriage and Kinship” (rather than “Kinship and Marriage”), with marriage as instituted by God in prologue myth, not natural descent, recognized as the primary social relationship.

Finally, fourth, I think, for some reason, I will be even more excited to see gifted Christian anthropologists using Christian theory study and write about postsecular religiosities and subjectivities, than I

am to see even a Tanya Luhmann, Joel Robbins, or Ruy Blanes study and write about Christianities.

With that I rest.

Postscript

I repeat here my own Scripture-based definition of “religion,” integral to my own Christian anthropology; I also relate a second anecdote, as a thankful nod to someone else working in the field.

religion: created humankind’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value.



Photo 3

Thom Wolf talking about worldview/lens, worldvenue/lifestyle during his plenary address at the 2018 national EMS conference.

At the October 2018 Evangelical Missiological Society’s national conference, after I had presented my paper and the question-&-discussion time had yielded to coffee break, there were still a few people wanting to ask questions or make comments before I could politely get free to join in the break. The person clearly satisfied to be last among this number was Thom Wolf, of New Delhi’s University Institute and one of the conference’s plenary speakers—and we are still

³³ José Mapril, Ruy Blanes, Emerson Giumbelli & Erin K. Wilson (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Not relevant to anything here in the current paper, I met and enjoyed greatly relating to Blanes, an atheist (at least at that time), at a 2006 IUAES intercongress at Cape Town, South Africa.

³⁴ Whether or not disingenuously, with disingenuousness always a political possibility.

talking. Destination? I have no doubt that it will be, at base, for me at least, more/further Christian anthropology.



Photo 4

Thom Wolf (center) in informal question-&-discussion with conference attendees after his 2018 national EMS plenary address.

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Recovering Pharisees: A Faith-Adjacent Ethnography

Gregory Stephens

This story grew from participant observation in a men's group at Highland Church of Christ in Abilene. I was an "insider-outsider" who was raised in this church, but had drifted, and called himself "post-Christian" to students.¹ Yet I wrote about how Bob Marley and Frederick Douglass used the Bible. I taught the Bible as Literature in the Caribbean. Disenchanted with scholarly abstractions I migrated into creative writing and ethnography. Scripture penetrated some of my literary prose. In late 2024 I left my academic position to father my teenaged daughter in Tucson. The world shuddered on its axis. I wanted to hear new voices.

In 2025 I began binging on podcasts. I noted a hunger for a "faith-adjacent language." Mostly this was voiced by the faithless, though church attendance among young men is rising. "Deep inside, they want to have faith in something," David Brooks wrote. Something is also stirring among some secular outsiders, as Briahna Joy Gray confessed to Chris Hedges.²

Is there a version of the language of faith intelligible to outsiders? Some people distrust dogma, but want to learn how being committed to a higher purpose can

help coalition building. But most left-leaning folk wouldn't be caught dead in a room full of Christians. Hence the wish for language *adjacent to faith*, but not tainted by religious moralizing.

The leftist "circular firing squad"³ had a certain kinship with Pharisees, it occurred to me. Dangerous demands for doctrinal purity. Here's an AI view of "Recovering Pharisees":

Pharisees were a Jewish sect known for "self-righteousness, legalism, and judgmental attitudes." In churches today, a *recovering Pharisee* seeks to overcome such tendencies, and to embrace instead "humility, grace, and genuine love."

Such a process requires "introspection and honesty about one's own faults." Neither left-liberals nor conservatives in U.S. politics are talking about *recovery from self-righteousness*. So I decided to listen to what one group had to say about recovery from their judgmental upbringing. This was a men's Bible Study group at Highland Church of Christ in Abilene Texas, which I attended in October 2025. I relied on participant observation, and the study of artefacts.⁴

¹ As a youth, I was perhaps a "disenchanted Christian." Charles Moore. 2002. "Word to the Reader," in Eberhard Arnold, *God's Revolution: Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom*. (Bruderhof Foundation, vi).

² David Brooks. "The Rise of Right-Wing Nihilism." *New York Times* (Aug. 22, 2025). Ruth Igielnik and Ruth Graham. "More Young Men say Religion is 'Very Important' to Them, Poll Finds." *New York Times* (April 16, 2026).

³ Gregory Stephens. 2023. "Postcolonialism as leftist firing squad and procrustean bed: a communicative take." *Journal for Cultural Research* 27(1): 38-51.

⁴ Audrey Alejandro. 2021. "Reflexive discourse analysis: A methodology for the practice of reflexivity." *European Journal of International Relations* 27(1): 150-74. [Author's ethnographic methods](#); Gregory Stephens. 2024. "[Decolonial Refusals](#): Ethnographic Writing from the post-Periphery." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*; 2020. "[Footnotes from the Margins](#): Outcomes-based literary nonfiction pedagogy in Puerto Rico." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* (Spring);

“Upside-Down Living: Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount,” a “men’s Bible Studies series,” ran Sept. 15-Dec. 8, 2025.⁵ I wanted to hear the take of a congregation that had evolved far from the doctrinaire stances that ruled during my youth (in the Church of Christ generally).

These 2025 Christians *heard* the anger that Jesus directed towards his era’s religious leaders. His radically inclusive *kingdom of heaven* was inseparable from rhetorical hit jobs on Pharisees. At the first Sermon on the Mount group I attended (October 6, 2025), leader Terry Cagle began by reading the lyrics to “Recovering Pharisee.” This lyric sparked ruminations that men’s group members would make about their unfinished progress as recovering Pharisees:

It’s the way of the human heart
To confess other people’s sin
Reluctant to admit my part
Or the deeper problem within

Is this lyric not both truthful, and far removed from what is audible in political discourse?

The men would go on to examine the self-righteous nature of some traditions in which they were raised, as well as how in-group/out-group walls continue to present challenges. I will later return to the testimonies of these men. But first:

*Where and How I Enter*⁶

Ethnographers must listen to our subjects, trying to understand their view of the cultural processes in which they participate. But the positionality of researchers determines what subjects are willing to say, and how formations of the researcher (class, gender, ethno-racial, economic, education, etc.) shape their interpretation, for better or worse.

There was no way to leave myself out of this project. The moment I walked in, the entire room—some 15-20 “white men” in their fifties and sixties—turned to stare at me.

“You’re looking at me like I’m a stranger!” I said, to cut the ice.

“No, you are welcome. Come, sit with us.”

“Many of you will know my sister Jayma.”

“Jayma Savage?!”

“Yes, my older sister.”

“Ah, she is a super woman,” one said. She had spoken from the stage that Sunday about her “prayer room.”⁷ Her spirit of service was seen by all who knew her as exemplary.

One man knew my father Farrell, AKA “Bo.” We had celebrated his 90th birthday at Highland, and Jayma was walking in his footsteps.

Family relations granted me a sort of insider status. Yet if my own family manifested a tendency to hagiography, even aspirations to saintliness,⁸ I was something of a black sheep. In the earlier years of my trajectory, at least, a Prodigal Son of sorts.

My perspective is *faith-adjacent*, as an insider-outsider.⁹ After careers as a journalist, songwriter, and

2019. *Three Birds Sing a New Song: A Puerto Rican trilogy about Dystopia, Precarity, and Resistance*. Intermezzo.; 2016. “[Digital Liminality](#) and Cross-Cultural Re-integration in the Middle East.” (*CEA Forum*).

⁵ Strong Faith Family Church, “The Upside Down Kingdom,” Sermon on the Mount (Aug. 5, 2024); <https://www.strongfaithchurch.org/discovering-the-upside-down-kingdom-beatitudes/>. “Sermon on [The Mount Overview](#),” from series The Upside Down Kingdom (June 15, 2025).

⁶ Alludes to Paula Giddings. 1984. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (HarperCollins).

⁷ Jayma Savage. “Prayers of the People” testimony, “Instrumental Worship at Highland” (Oct. 2025) [7:23 to 10:43]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8cTYFrkacw0&t=644s>

⁸ J. Omar Palafox. 2025. *Art of Sainthood: Tradition and Innovation in Christian Spirituality*. (Abilene Christian: UP).

⁹ Guannan Zou. 2023. “Beyond ‘Insider’ and ‘Outsider’ in the Field,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (Apr.): 1-11. Sowparnika Balaswaminathan. 2020. “The Outsider,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 45(1) (June): 92-99.

professor, this study represents a “return” or a “revisit.”¹⁰ Inevitably revisits are a *revisioning*—acquiring the necessary distance to see with new eyes. Despite my *adjacency*, long ago I decided that the scriptural traditions in which my parents raised me were pearls of great price. I came to that view by hearing scriptures “sung back to me” by different traditions—by abolitionists in Great Britain and the U.S., by the Civil Rights movement, by Bob Marley and the Rastas (and their worldwide diaspora), and by Mayans in Chiapas—who like the abolitionists and the Rastas, re-envisioned “Exodus” through their own cultural and political sensibilities.¹¹

I share skepticism towards organized religion.¹² Yet I embrace the power of scriptures which have a certain faith-adjacent reach and resonance. Beyond their archetypal power as *stories*, scriptures are repositories of ethical teaching with continuing value. The parables especially resist *us vs. them* interpretations. They function as *tools for living*,¹³ as in Buddhist practice, more than moralistic dogma. But speaking to and beyond communities of faith requires much caution, and translation.

Week One (Oct. 6, 2025)—Walls and Outsiders

Upside-Down Living: Fulfilling or Reframing the Law

Testimonies about what being in “recovery” meant for participants is my main focus here. The framework of the class and series refers to a refrain of Jesus, “the first shall be last, and the last, first.” The opening section of the Sermon on the Mountain repeats a sort of reversal of position at every turn: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

Group leader Terry Cagle employed a sort of literary analysis of the thematic structure. The Sermon starts in the third person, moves to second person (“You are the light of the world” [Matt. 5:14]), and then moves into first-person pronouncements: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17).

Cagle took this verse as the focal point of that night’s class. He described this fulfillment of Jewish scripture as, in practice, a *reframing*. And he introduced this discussion prompt: “Pharisees were great at law, but lousy at relationships.”

In what ways were these men trying to reframe the conventional teaching of the Church of Christ? It had always denied being a denomination, and saw itself as superior to or more righteous than *the denominations*. The C of C claimed to have “no creed but the Bible.”¹⁴

What did we remember of the Church of Christ of our youths? The answers came easily: No music. No dancing. No discussion of the Holy Spirit. No *mixed swimming*! One elder, an Abilene native, provided a memory which served as a framing metaphor:

I remember this pool that had a wood fence in the middle separating males and females. As teenagers, we would hold our breath to dive down to where there were knotholes in the wood, to try to catch a glimpse of the girls in their swimsuits.

Such explicit gender segregation had ended decades ago. Highland was an unusual Church of Christ, allowing instrument music (in one service), and featuring women on stage reading scripture, singing, baptizing, and even serving as elders.

A discussion ensued: walls were no longer visible, but they metaphorically still troubled, or put limits on,

¹⁰ Michael Burawoy. 2003. “Revisits: An outline of a theory of reflexive ethnography.” *American Sociological Review* 68(5): 645-79.

¹¹ Gregory Stephens. 1999. *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (Cambridge UP); 2019. *Poetics of Indigenismo in Zapatista discourse: The Mexican revolution revisioned through Mayan eyes* (Cambridge Scholars).

¹² G. Stephens. “Personal note on the study of religious expression,” in *On Racial Frontiers*.
https://www.academia.edu/29278663/Personal_note_on_the_study_of_religious_expression_pdf

¹³ Tools for living: alludes to Kenneth Burke. 2010. *Equipment for living: The literary reviews of Kenneth Burke* (Parlor Press).

¹⁴ Leonard Allen’s critique: 2021. *In the Great Stream: Imagining Churches of Christ in the Christian Tradition* (ACU Press).

relationships with outsiders. Members were both proud of how inclusive and welcoming Highland had become (which I can attest to), but at the same time, they worried that the exclusive nature of the Church of Christ in its roots might lead them to put up new walls. Such essentially Puritan boundary maintenance limited their ability to get through to the outsiders who were attracted to this congregation, but often could not come all the way inside.

The Cross-Dresser at the Gates

The first story about outsiders who *tried* to find a home at Highland centered on a cross-dresser named Georgia. This tale was recounted by “Darrin,” an elder.

Some of y’all remember Georgia, said Darrin. He was married and had two children. But when he came to Highland, he was living as a cross-dresser. I’ll never forget, when Georgia applied to become a member at Highland, we told him about the two services Highland had begun to hold—the acapella service earlier for more traditional members, and the instrumental service. “Oh, I could never attend an instrumental service,” Georgia told me.

Several men chuckled at the memory of this open cross-dresser who however thought that playing instruments during worship was the work of the devil.

He kept asking about membership but we put it on the back burner. Then we heard that Georgia, who had chewed tobacco, had developed throat cancer. From a hospital in Dallas he sent word that he still wanted to complete formal admission to membership.

Finally we voted to approve his membership. Some elders went to the hospital in Dallas, and we had a little ceremony. Georgia was crying. But he seemed grateful. It was bittersweet for me. He had wasted away and died a week later. So although we facilitated a sort of “death-bed conversion,” I felt guilty that it had taken that long.

Darrin’s story set the tone for other testimonials. The world of the segregated swimming pool could not continue. But were young people always better off now that they could swim and dance together, while girls dressed much like young women across the U.S., and

young men, instead of looking through knotholes, now went “underwater” to peer at pornography?

Another angle on *upside-down living* was Terry Cagle relating his sense of regret about *Shaggy*, the addict who joined but couldn’t get clean

Shaggy came to us with a history of addiction issues. He wanted to do right, was good-spirited. But he never could quite get fully sober. Shaggy attached himself to me—sort of a father-son discipleship. I tried repeatedly to help him get clear. But somehow I couldn’t quite get through to him. His addictions were, in some way, beyond my reach.

Cagle’s repeated “I couldn’t quite reach him” suggested that this testimony was also about his own “Recovering Pharisee” syndrome. It was also a *Lost Sheep* story—or inversion. In Luke 15 a shepherd left 99 sheep in the field to search after one who had strayed. But Cagle’s story was about *the one who got away*. He could not bring this lost sheep back to the fold.

Shaggy’s story lacked closure. The addict wanted to be with the believers, and made all the right noises, yet his addictions in the end were his master.

I began to connect the dots broadly. Another Bible study group I participated in just prior to the pandemic, Ashland United Methodist in St. Joseph, Missouri, came to mind. For some reason I was shocked by how many in this couple’s group confessed that they had identified with the resentment of the older brother i.e., the Good Son who had stayed home, while the younger brother indulged himself. Why should riotous living be rewarded?

That some readers might not identify with the Prodigal Son, I had never considered. At Ashland they had been honor-the-father types. They expected to be seated at the front, to receive their just rewards. And didn’t the good sons and daughters tend to align with the Pharisees? They had followed the law.

But it was the ones who had strayed, sinners and social outsiders, who “were all gathered around to hear Jesus” (Luke 15:1). The Pharisees and the scholars did not like this. Yet the Nazarene insists: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Because “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 15:7; 5:32).

Jesus had an affinity for rebels and backsliders, who pressed round to hear the teachings from the Galilean

borderlands. Some leaders in the Abilene men's group did not quite know how to connect with the black sheep--the good-spirited but incorrigible sinners. But the rank and file repeated what I heard as a through-line of the Highland congregation:

"We always err on the side of grace."

Sexuality Issues

Final discussion centered on male sexuality, a recurrent concern. An elder I'll call "Rob" shared a memory about a talk with his father, who told him about "what is coming"--male desires that surge in early adolescence. The father had described this as localized in a boy's penis.

"Is it alright to use the word penis?!" Rob asked.

Several men chuckled nervously. "Yes, of course. We're here for each other."

During time with this group, my skepticism about repression of male sexuality resurged. Confessions of having had problems with pornography seem to lead to an aim to extirpate male desire. But I'm reminded of testimonials from addicts who never seem to get fully free.

Finally we discussed what "fulfilling the law" meant. Cagle drew attention to the rhetorical *bombs* Jesus dropped on the Pharisees. He repeatedly used one word to characterize these bombs: "*boom*." It sounded like a sort of awe that could not be fully expressed. These were the *good sons*, despite their human problems. Their painful recoveries cast shadows on how far the church had come from the doctrinaire positions in which we were raised. Many walls had been let go of, only to be erected in new ways--especially in sexuality's domain.

Are Metrics a Pharisees Model?

The preacher Shane Hughes, during my revisit, twice centered his lesson on a text that I was reading prior to the service. I experienced this as a sort of synchronicity.

Early Oct. 5 I reread Matt. 19-23, discussing with my son Samuel these *cosmic reversal* themes: "The stone that the builder refused shall be the head cornerstone"; "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," etc. The worship reading was Matthew 22: 1-10. A king sends servants to invite people to a wedding banquet. Some of his subjects mock the servants, but others kill them. Verse 8, "The wedding banquet is

ready, but those invited were not worthy," seems to signal a shift from Jews to Gentiles. Shane's sermon, focused on going beyond the letter of the law, sketched Highland's pathway of membership, participation, and service.

In a conversational style, Shane used Jesus' critique of the Pharisees to push back on members who acted like students, asking the teacher what they must do to get an "A."

Some say--just give me the bottom line. It sounds like they're asking, what's the lowest common denominator of participation at Highland that I can get away with?

Hughes acknowledged that "there *are* some metrics that we want you to engage." But:

Metrics around spirituality and faith are at best risky. At worst, they're dangerous. People who specialize in hitting metrics around faith, *Jesus has opinions about them. They look a lot like Pharisees.* Pharisees looked like they were doing everything right. But it's easy to look the part, yet your inside is empty.

Highland's anti-model was: *we don't want to look like the Pharisees.* Following form was not enough to enact the kingdom of heaven. Hence the undertones of Shane Hughes' punchline: "It's really easy to ape the rituals," like just showing up. But "attendance isn't the goal. The goal is wonder. Here's the rub. We can manufacture adrenaline, . . . but we can't engineer theophany. [awe] The pathway puts you in the posture, and trains your eyes and ears so that when God does show up, you know how to dance."

Hughes closed with his view of a *good metric*: "pursue unlikely friendships." I wondered: as my family's globe-trotting black sheep, was I a prospective *unlikely friendship* at Highland?

I thought about some other tough love in Matthew 19-23. The Pharisees tried to get Jesus to endorse easy divorce, but he gave this rather Pauline explanation to his disciplines:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and [those] who have been made eunuchs by men, and [others] who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Matt 19: 11-12)

Few will be fertile soil for this message. Eunuchs cannot “be fruitful and multiply.” In any case, the message is certainly not anti-sexual. Sparring with the “chief priests and elders” who tried to corner him in the temple, Jesus spun out several parables. This one is show-stopping:

The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you. For John [the Baptist] came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. (Matt 21:31-32).

Boom, indeed! Locals had much to say about recovering from the Pharisee model, sexuality especially. But Shane Hughes focused on smaller metrics. “Be kinder to family and more patient with the people around you, more forgiving of the little wrongs.” Which seems to be the stance Jesus took towards consensual sexual transgressions.

Re-imagining the Samaritan Woman at the Well

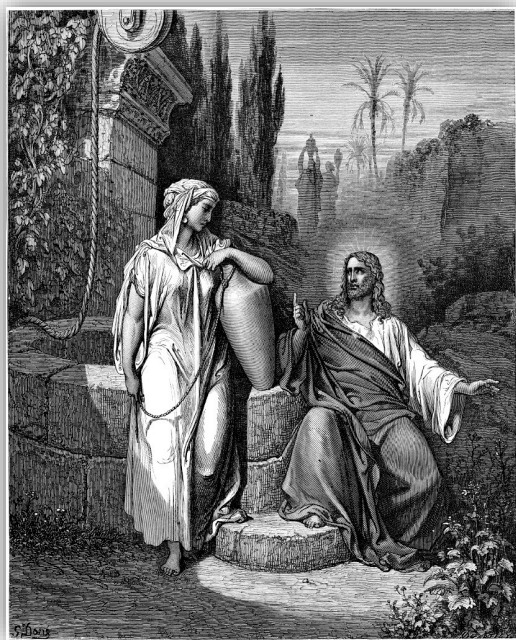


Photo 2
Woman at Well.

During the October men’s group, I commuted from a small ranch near Dyess Air Force Base to Abilene Christian. For quiet corners, I gravitated to the Gaines Stanley Theological Reading Room. On the left corner of the entrance was a glass representation of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. This image led my thoughts in unexpected directions. I began studying the Samaritans, because my attention had been arrested by this piece of glass art at ACU. John Quartley, working with engraver Gustave Dore, portrayed the Samaritan woman as a hottie. She guards the entrance to the Churches of Christ flagship institution’s theology room. Put plainly, her nipples show. The artist has also accentuated the shapely form of her thighs.

Artistic depictions of the Samaritan woman are part of the visual unconscious of Christian communities. Compared to other versions of the encounter, *this* Jesus looks like a flesh and blood man. He sits in a manly position, thighs open. He’s sharing his wisdom, but his finger points straight up.

After five husbands, this woman now lived with a lover. The artist gave visual form to the reality that men found her attractive. This is rare in church art, but some artists visualized her in full womanhood. In brief, I want to show how visual representations of sexuality are often hidden in plain sight. This image would be familiar to some members of the men’s group, and the congregation, many of whom studied at Abilene Christian.

Representations of Jesus and the Samaritan woman often show the disciples approaching. Jesus had been alone with the woman. “Celibacy was extremely rare in first-century Palestine,” Reza Azlan notes.¹⁵ The myth of Jesus as asexual is implausible, like Mary as lifelong virgin. This son of a carpenter enjoyed the company of women, the Gospels make clear. He defended their presence, their honor, and even acts of intimacy, such as the woman who was criticized for putting perfume on his head (Mark 14) or feet (Luke 7). And always, he listened to women.

The Preacher’s Take: Reorientating Worship

Shane Hughes had a different take on John 4, connected to his “Pathways” refresh. “We want you to be in a posture that is open to experiencing awe,” he said. What is that *posture*? Mere politricks or

¹⁵ Reza Azlan. 2013. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. (Random House, 37).

entertainment cannot satisfy our “hunger for the infinite.” Nestled within the human spirit is a longing to serve, to praise, something greater than ourselves, said Hughes.

After discussing the *revaluation* inherent in the Old English roots of *worship*, as *Worth-Ship*, Hughes brought this back to a latent hunger in the Samaritan woman. This only became apparent to me when I went back and watched the sermon online, taking notes.

In John 4, the author is giving us a sense of how to orient *ourselves towards proper worship*. It's unusual that this deeply theological conversation is with a woman and a non-Jew. Jesus considers her theological claims and he responds to her.

Then Hughes took this woman's perspective. “She asks a question to the one Jewish male who will talk to her. Which mountain are we supposed to worship on?” *True worship* could only be in Jerusalem, Judeans claimed. Samaritans, Northern Israelites, worshipped at Mt. Gerizim. They claimed to be the Israelites who most accurately followed Mosaic teachings. So the woman asks: should we worship on Gerizim, as my people believe, or in Jerusalem, as your people believe?

In “fulfillment mode,” Jesus sidesteps geography: “God is a spirit, and those that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” This is one of many instances in the Gospels when a woman seems to pull a larger truth out of Jesus. He began this conversation, as with the Syro-Phoenician woman, claiming that Jews were superior, or a higher priority. But the women he interacted with had a broader view of worship, of faith, and of justice, than did the Pharisees.

Important things happen at wells, Hughes concluded: “John is saying something about the marriage that's going to happen between Jews and Gentiles.” Indeed, this is a subtext of the Good Samaritan parable. Learning to love neighbors as ourselves—especially when they are fundamentally different—is a metric at the root of “all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22: 40).

Shane called the Samaritan woman “broken.” To heal, she needed to know what it means to worship in spirit and in truth. True. But from a faith-adjacent perspective, I wonder about the temptation to call *broken* women who have “been around.” Remember

how prostitutes are better positioned than virtue-signaling Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven?

The sexually experienced Samaritan woman, doing deep theology with a prophet claiming to be the “son of man,” sets up the men's group discussion about lust in Week 2.

Week Two (Oct. 13, 2025)—Murder Management And Leer Pressure

Cagle split this week's study into two parts: “Murder Management,” about anger, and “Dealing with Leer Pressure,” about lust. My focus is mostly on the deeply personal way in which the men responded to the issue of lust. But I want to first touch on the opening theme of how “anger begets murder” in both literal and metaphorical ways.

The reading for Part One was Matthew 5: 21-26. Jesus demonstrates that his “fulfillment” of the law is a radical reframing. Hebraic law had specified: “You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement.’ But I say unto you that whoever is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement” (v. 21-22). The reframing still applies to our insult-dominated social media environment and national political discourse.

“We live in an angry, murderous world,” Cagle intoned. Some readers may carry stereotypes of Christians wanting to sing praise songs for all eternity. But we all have to deal with road rage, or bad behavior in stores and airports. Many of us wrestle with images of the annihilation of Gaza. Rhetorical, environmental, and bodily carnage surrounds us.

Here in this segment were proofs that, whether in Pauline Christianity, or in the “historical Jesus,” controlling anger is seen as a higher priority than prayer, or legal process. Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mountain passage cited above, Jesus does another reframing: if you are making a spiritual offering, and at that moment if you “remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift [and] first go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5: 23-24, NIV).

This is a common New Testament theme: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26); “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). The slow to

anger theme also runs through Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.¹⁶

I wondered, didn't Jesus let the sun go down on his wrath towards the Pharisees?

Transitioning, Cagle said provocatively: "That was the 'easy' part of Matthew 5. But now we're all going to *squirm*" (Matt. 5:27-30). The old law was, "You shall not commit adultery." But, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (v. 28). And then: "it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (v. 29).

In Cagle's translation, "the eyes and the heart are sexual organs." As he shared statistics, such as, "30% of internet usage is porn," I heard echoes of the Church of Christ in my youth. Paul distrusted the body. He wanted to "nail the flesh to the cross." One still hears that refrain today, even among young and beautiful Christians.

The men were hunched over, faces down. *Squirming*, indeed. Confessions followed: "It's tough on guys," said Rob, whose Dad had warned about the wayward penis. "Pornography is breaking up marriages," said Dale, a bald-headed man who had worn a "Mountaineers" T-shirt. And a white-haired elder with a dignified bearing chimed in: "the church is ignoring the problem that our young men have with pornography." This provoked a chorus of affirmations. "We all need a brother to talk to," repeated Rob. "I know that pornography made me ashamed, and I did not want to reach out. We need to be able to share these struggles with our brothers."

A different sort of narrative broke in, semi-comically. Terry's beeper kept going off, warning about his low blood sugar. Cagle's wife called two elders there: was he responding to this warning? They did an intervention. Terry gave one of them the keys to his red Toyota, to fetch a Dr. Pepper, or sweet tea. Terry slurped on this, while discussing "lust in the heart."

Some examples the men provided seemed archaic—like Dallas Cowboys legend Roger Staubach bragging about his monogamous sexuality. Phyllis George had asked how he felt compared to Joe

Namath, with "a different woman on his arm every time we see him?"

"I'm sure I'm just as sexually active as Joe. The difference is that all of mine is with one woman." Men's reactions seemed like another form of virtue signaling: "Roger hit the end zone with that comeback. Real men don't commit adultery. A real man sticks with one woman."¹⁷

Some "heretical" questions kept popping in my head. We are not genetically wired for monogamy, some argue. I wondered: why was David, a murderer and adulterer, an ex-mercenary for the Philistines—beloved by the Lord? I am all for commitment and the horizon of life-long partnership. But why was Jesus so lenient to the promiscuous women who crowded around him?

Discussion returned to anger. Dale, the bald "Mountaineer," wanted to explore the notion of justifiable righteous anger. "Is Jesus the only one who gets to turn over tables?" he asked.

"How did his righteous anger turn out?" I asked.

There was a brief pause. "They killed him," said Dale softly.

Boom. In summer 2024, I had picked up a strategically abandoned New Testament at ACU. Struck by the anger of Jesus in Luke, I began thinking about a counter-narrative: "The Anger of the Prince of Peace." That would surely be a fit topic for "Upside-Down Living."

Week Three (Oct. 20, 2025)—Divorce And Oath-Breaking

Believers might want scriptures like the Sermon on the Mount to be untouched by local, cultural, or temporal dynamics. But in human affairs context is everything. Take the situational ethics some men in my study group applied to Matt. 5:33—"Do not break your oath."

All morals are somewhat situational, experience had taught these men. "When my wife was dying, she made me promise something," Rob recalled, his face still clouded. "I won't get into specifics—some of you know about this. But after she passed, I talked with

¹⁶ "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath" (Psalms 37:8); "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1); "Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:9).

¹⁷ "Real Men Don't Commit Adultery." *Preaching Today* (May 1997); <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/may/4522.html>

family and friends. It became clear: keeping the promise would have been worse than breaking it.”

The men had faced such hard truths. How much “slack” do we give promises made under pressure—the exigencies of, say, torture, or the relative coercion applied by a dying loved one? Are our obligations to the dead equal to what we owe the living? Can an individual *see ahead*, sufficiently to understand the impact that fulfilling or breaking an oath would have on family, community, and congregation (or nation)?

At times Cagle adopted a curmudgeonly tone, perhaps partly performative. Other times he folded in references to popular culture, or literature. This time he quoted Margaret Atwood: “divorce is like an amputation: you survive, but there is less of you.”

Jesus rejected any reason for divorcing a wife “except for sexual immorality” (Matt. 5:31). Nowadays even conservative Bible readers pay attention to scriptural context. “In Jesus’ day, men held all the cards,” Cagle began. “When Pharisees wanted someone more ‘pleasing,’ they sought justification for their trade-in” (Matt. 19: 3-10). “They wanted divorce for any reason. Jesus’ reaction is rooted in how unjust divorce was to women in the ancient world. In Biblical culture, divorce marginalized women.” I found myself nodding along.

Jesus’ empathy for women went beyond Mediterranean or Hebrew norms. That empathy has roots. At the end of the Old Testament, we can read: “I hate divorce,” says the God of Israel. “And I hate it when men clothe themselves with justice” (Malachi 2:16).

“Proclamations against divorce have been weaponized,” Cagle observed. I remembered my father saying “God hates divorce” when my first marriage faltered. I experienced his claim to speak for God as weaponized. Comparing then and now, experience teaches that if divorce historically marginalized women, in contemporary courts divorce often marginalizes fathers.

Cagle mixed in church humor. A couple who wanted a divorce went to see their pastor. First, the pastor told them that they should follow the biblical model about love as “one flesh.”

“No, that’s impossible,” they said immediately.

“Well then, love your neighbor as yourself. Can you do that?”

“Nope.”

“Then your only other option is to love your enemies. Start there.”

I had an epiphany sparked by a Sermon on the Mount reversal. “Give to the one who asks you” we are told (Matt. 5:42). If someone asks for your coat; give them your shirt as well. If they ask you to go with them one mile, go the second mile. I married Janice in Jamaica in 2008. She initiated separation in 2023, saying she would file for divorce. Two years later, there were still no papers. Meanwhile she made it hard for me to see my daughter. *Running out the clock*. I saw Matt. 5:42 through new eyes: I should “give to the one who asks you” and go the extra mile.

I thought about the relevance for these men of my decision: I could not obey the rule against divorce, if I wanted to be a present father. At the end of the class, I raised my hand.

“I feel called to speak. ‘Weaponizing’ scriptures about divorce struck a chord. I just got word: I have to fly to Tucson Thursday for a court hearing about a divorce and custody process.”

I had everyone’s full attention. But I saw them gathering things, thinking ahead.

“As a teacher when students start gathering things right before class ends, I know I can’t tell them anything new.” Several men chuckled knowingly.

“In short, I’ve realized that I have to seek divorce in order to be a father. If I’m to have regular time with my daughter during her last two years of high school, I must pursue divorce.”

“You’ll be first on the agenda next week.”

The men circled around two members for prayer. First, a man whose wife divorced him after a car wreck left him disabled, almost mute. Then, *laid hands on* me. The heart of the prayer was a petition for a “miracle” so that I could give my daughter what she needs.

Away from the men’s group, I listened to podcasts from “former sinners” who were still able to speak the language of those still indulging in drugs, promiscuity, etc. In the “Girls Gone Bible” podcast, two glam white gals, ex-Hollywood actresses, now talked about walking the straight and narrow—reading scripture, yet intent on looking good while doing so.

Their “Go and Sin No More” episode (Oct. 24, 2025) focused on Jesus’ empathy for an accused adulteress. They saw the passage about Jesus writing silently in the sand as a way to avoid further

embarrassing a woman whose life was at risk because of sexual transgression.¹⁸

In “Deny Yourself Pleasure” (Jan. 17, 2025), they read Ecclesiastes Chapter Two on the “futility of pleasure.” Ariel and Angela followed an anti-body Pauline script which had helped drive me away from church in my youth. “The flesh is inherently sinful,” said Angela. Betraying the zeal of the recent convert, she professed that she wanted to “*nail my flesh to the cross.*”

What Christians were saying about recovery might resonate with the faith-adjacent: recovery was big business in American culture and politics.

Recovery

I sought to use local artefacts as much as possible. Ordering Starbucks in the ACU library, I would skim recent publications. One day I read a reference to “America’s rising recovery movement,” from the sleeve of *Fentanyl Nation* by Ryan Hampton.¹⁹

On the national stage, *recovery* is indeed fetishized, made into a cash cow. American recovery has religious roots. I read Leonard Allen, whose life-long *mission* was to build bridges between the Church of Christ and the Christian “mainland.” Moving between a historically fundamentalist home base, and the Christian mainland, he helped develop a sort of connecting land mass—a peninsula of sorts.

A book Leonard co-authored with Richard Hughes—*Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875*—shows the contemporary recovery movement as saturated with typically American beliefs which are rooted in religious movements. Our political modality is suffused by a millennialism which cannot be separated from religion. Religious scholars of millennialism mostly “have failed to recognize” that implicit in the rhetoric of newness, in its millennial form, “was the fundamental theme of recovery” (Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, p. 2). Here is their through-line: “*Recovery of primal norms has been a fundamental preoccupation of the American people.* This legacy survives . . . in a myriad of forms” (p. 3, my emphasis).

Hughes and Leonard repeat three keywords for going back to primal norms: *recovery*, *reformation*, and *restoration*. The goal is recovery *of* the primal, not *from* a primitive state, they emphasize. The Church of Christ has roots in the Protestant reformation, but the C of C’s focus has always been to *restore the good works* of the early Christians, by recovering something of their scriptural purity. But as the “Sermon on the Mount” men’s group shows, there is no way to read the *end-times modality* of the early church, or the *new times* of the early Republic, without letting our experience shape how we read those would-be universalizing movements, and their sacred texts.

Week Four (Oct. 27, 2025)



Photo 2
Foot Washing

Back at Highland, the Men’s Group had been cancelled for a presentation by Soren Samuelson, a Swedish missionary whose work in Myanmar Highland supported. I took this photo of the elders washing the feet of Samuelson and his son Israel. Their presentation was a sort of “faith-adjacent practice,” though clearly faith-driven.

I had rehearsed comments about my *fatherhood over marriage* crucible. Now this church’s cultural

¹⁸ Camilla Klein. “[What Did Jesus Write in the Sand? Discover the Mystery Behind His Actions.](#)” *Christian Educators Academy* (1-27-25); Vincent. “What did Jesus write in the dirt in John 8:1-11? [Big Name Theologians](#) weigh in.” *Classic Theology* (3-16-22). “Go & Sin No More.” *Girls Gone Bible* (10-24-2025); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_oFPG7xAYs.

¹⁹ “rising recovery movement.” Ryan Hampton. 2024. *Fentanyl Nation* (St. Martin’s) [sleeve].

practices could be visualized, instead. This community of faith was focused on *restoration*, more than individual salvation, as in most Protestant churches.

Samuelson felt called to Myanmar from China. He listed Myanmar's [apocalyptic problems](#). Since a February 2021 coup, Myanmar has faced civil war, massive human rights violations, and economic collapse. Their scam centers have been in global news.²⁰ These crime syndicates used 100,000 quasi-slaves to run online scams. Victims from China, Southeast Asia, and Africa are offered high-paying jobs in sectors like digital marketing, customer support, or cryptocurrency trading. On arrival they are forced to labor under constant surveillance by armed guards.

In such circumstances, a focus on individual salvation is of little use. Samuelson created small cells in private houses, rather than a central house of worship. Using photos and video interviews, he described a dozen cells, including cells for fish thieves, for wife-beaters, and for mothers who had sexually trafficked their daughters because of family debts. This audio-visual presentation illustrated Highland's willingness to put their money where their mouth is.

At the end, an elder introduced the foot-washing ritual, saying "we don't do this often." Samuelson's devotion was inspiring. No "holier than thou" vibes; no talk about conversion, or an afterlife. Just a committed Christian being a servant to people living in apocalyptic conditions.

Foot washing "was a recognized act of welcome long before Israel entered Canaan."²¹ Imagine the historical context: "Travel in the ancient Near East was on unpaved roads shared by animals." Long walks in open sandals left the feet caked with dust, sweat, and animal feces.

The sense that strangers washing one's feet was degrading was experienced by ancient Mediterranean elites. Rabbinic rulings specified that washing a rabbi's feet was "too degrading" for disciples. So "*Jesus' action shattered convention*."²² It erased social distance and hierarchy.

In the photo, Terry Cagle stands at right, his hand on Samuelson's back. The missionary lifts his face, eyes closed in a state of apparent rapture. How might the non-faithful or faith-adjacent react to this scenario? It might strike them as cult-like, uncomfortable. On screen, they would cancel it. But as an outsider-insider, it struck me both as an exercise in radical humility, and a way to honor "suffering servants" who have gone far beyond the call of duty.

Primary instances of foot-washing in the New Testament involve women. There was a "sinful" woman (Luke 7:36–50) who heard that Jesus was dining with Simon the Pharisee, and crashed the party. She washed Jesus's feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, then poured on an alabaster jar of perfume. "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner," said the host.

In John 12: 1-8, Judas Iscariot complains: "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" Indeed, the ritual *shatters convention*. There is an eroticism involved—repressed in the Christian tradition, but male characters were aware of this. Why was a spiritual teacher, a prophet, letting a prostitute engage in such intimate acts with his bare feet?

Jesus' view that prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven more easily than religious leaders is still hard to assimilate, within a tradition that insists on the virginity of Jesus' mother. After the weeping prostitute comes a parable about levels of forgiveness. Those who have sinned most, feel most grateful. The Highland elders evoke some of this perspective while engaged in foot-washing with a missionary who had attended to sinners in Myanmar.

November 2, 2025—The Restoration of All Things

The prior section emphasized *restoration rather than salvation* at Highland. For my last Sunday visit, let us examine a "restoration of all things" ideal which is both utopian, and pragmatic. Here, Hughes introduced an overview of the next three years, "2029

²⁰ Rebecca Ratcliffe. 2025. "Revealed: the huge growth of Myanmar scam centres that may hold 100,000 trafficked people." *The Guardian* (Sept. 7).

²¹ "What is the significance of foot washing in biblical times?" *Bible Hub* (N.D.). https://biblehub.com/q/Foot_washing_s_biblical_significance_2.htm

²² Megidido and "shattered convention." Ibid; Amy Frykholm. 2020. "The strange, humbling ritual of foot washing." *The Christian Century* (March 25).

Vision.” This lesson bookended my sketch of a pragmatic ethic of service, rather a performative faith.

Hughes used two mini-parables from Matthew 13 to frame his vision of faith-as-service. Jesus preaches from a boat, seeking a safe distance from a massive throng on shore. Jesus “told them many things in parables.” The most famous is the *Parable of the Sower*, which inspired a speculative fiction by Octavia Butler. Jesus plays to the vanity of the disciples, saying that the masses could not understand “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,” other than via parables. But the (notoriously dense) twelve can be given a higher knowledge—an explanation.

What Hughes chose to focus on were three verses that present a “from small things” view of the Kingdom of Heaven. In one, a tiny mustard seed becomes a tree so immense that “the birds come and perch in its branches.” Then there is this one-verse gem:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matt 13: 33). “It was all leavened,” Hughes said—a metaphor for how small beginnings of Highland could function. Now I saw from a new angle one of the church’s mission statements: “to partner with God in the restoration of all things.”

This was “potentially a Copernican revolution,” Hughes said. Protestants usually focused on saving the individual. Post-Copernicus, faith is a powerful yeast that can raise up humanity, beyond individual salvation: “It was never Jesus’ goal to whisk you off to heaven.”

Instead, the goal is *self-emptying service*: “Reclaiming and renewing of all creation, rather than destroying it.” Hughes shared this orienting horizon: “We are a church that seeks God’s horizon, and not our own. We invest in ministries that bear fruit that we will never see.”

The *big fish* was deeper than the performative, as in “how many people got wet each year” (baptisms). Returning to the mustard seed vision of communal life, he told congregants: “you can live in our branches, raise your family. This is a place where you can thrive.”

This is one version of what a faith-adjacent pragmatics of faith might look like.

Post-Script (May 2026)

At a November Temporary Orders hearing in Tucson, I was granted joint custody of my daughter. This cantankerous judge listened intently when I read a statement about what I, as her father, could provide as Safiya approached adulthood—including spiritual values.

In April 2026, divorce and shared custody were finalized. “The restoration of some things” for this father. In a social world full of contempt for men, Safiya has a chance to observe how good men operate. And I learn by seeing the world through her eyes.

This is not the “old time religion” in which my parents raised me. I questioned my father, and now my children question me. The greatest gift I can give them is *to listen. Saber dialogar*.²³ This is what it means to me, to have recovered from the moral hectoring of the Pharisees.

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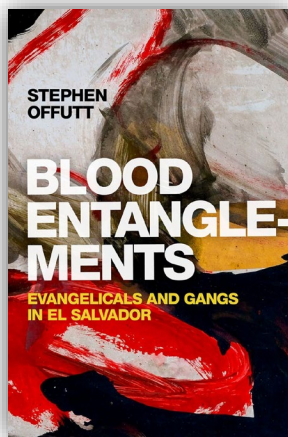
²³ While in Mexico with my children, two young Mexicanas said “*saber dialogar*” was their “special gift.” Gregory Stephens. 2020. “[Going South](#).” *Barely South*.

BOOK REVIEW

Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador

By Stephen Offutt

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



Oxford: Oxford University Press
2023

In *Blood Entanglements*, Stephen Offutt carries out a sociology study to explore the complex relationships between gangs and evangelicalism in modern El Salvador. At the outset, Offutt presents his central argument as studying El Salvador's lower class communities to understand how gangs and evangelicals are entangled with one another (3).

Early on, Offutt reviews the modern histories of both of these groups. Like the beginning of many evangelical missions, Offutt recalls a history of evangelicalism beginning with one individual; in this case, the missionary Francisco Penzotti who started a Bible study in El Salvador around 1893. By the end of this timeline, over half of poor communities became evangelicals. Juxtaposed to this religious history, the presence of gangs would emerge strongly. Offutt explains how gangs began as family clans. In the 1970s, gangs or *maras* would develop that seemed to be more representative of hippie culture. Noting further developments, Offutt highlights: "Maras evolved as

national political and social unrest grew. Full scale civil war broke out in 1980. The fraught environment was one reason that the increasing numbers of *maras* were becoming harder and more violent" (11). In time, gangs would proliferate, and because of their power they gained strong influence in communities, the public sphere and even in government and political procedures.

Offutt explains how many scholars, while engaging the relationships between gangs and religion, have noted the "haven thesis," that is, how religious communities, like churches, may provide a haven for the poor and those in social distress. He underscores a common modern example of Pentecostal churches in poor neighborhoods (7). Yet, Offutt proposes a new thesis: "the entanglement thesis" (15-16), which sets out to explore the broader interactions between evangelicalism and gangs that the haven thesis may overlook. This term is convenient as evangelicalism itself is "notoriously fluid and adaptable" (16). What is the value of the entanglement thesis? Offutt writes: "it privileges the geographic and physical proximity to social problems" over the tendency of evangelicals to try to separate from them (16). Focusing again on context, it "recognizes the implications of low barriers to entry on evangelical identity and community in impoverished places" (16). And lastly, the thesis pays attention to "social networks that connect church leaders and members" to the community (18). Rather than looking at the ties that break, there remain "relationships that continue outside of faith communities."

In chapter 1, Offutt describes the context of urban poverty in which many young people find themselves, noting several vulnerabilities in this context. Summarizing them in nine points, he writes: "food, water, sewerage, health, education, family, migration,

employment, and political institutions, are all causally linked to one another” (27-28).

Further, in this chapter Offutt introduces the “organization parallels” between gangs and evangelicals (28), demonstrating how both groups—at the grassroots level—“use similar organizational strategies to overcome the environmental challenges that poverty creates” (28). For example, both may adopt *patrimonial* systems (30). Other examples include rituals (31-32), recruiting methods (33), and internal codes of conduct (38); for example, while rituals could easily be embedded in religious practices, Offutt reminds us how gangs often use rituals to “incorporate individuals into the group” (32). Identifying such similarities that take place in this context, Offutt underscores and explores how “the two groups bleed into one another” (42).

In Chapter 2, Offutt discusses the entanglement of cosmologies between these two groups. For many across these groups, there can be similar beliefs in God, Satan, angels and demons. He notes how in the conversion experience (from gangs to evangelicalism), rather than a break from the past, there is now a double up on allegiances (59). Offutt expands on how one’s relational location—vis-a-vis to God or Satan—is changed, but not one’s beliefs (60-61). Rather than creating large cosmological distinctions, central to his thesis, Offutt points out: “The entanglement thesis intends to highlight evangelicalism’s cultural continuity and the shared, community wide cosmologies. Such dynamics have implications for all sectors and institutions of society” (64-65).

In Chapter 3, Offutt explores complicated family networks across these groups. In this chapter we see how gangs and evangelicals can offer forms of support for issues like domestic violence. Physical abuse in the home can lead kids to join gangs. For example, if a father is a factor in domestic abuse, a son may join a gang to find a means of protection. Though the son is now involved with the realities of street life, the house now possesses more order. Furthermore, to the youngest son, the older brother is now the “hero” due to a reckless decision to join a gang. The church at times remains involved because some families—though involved or affiliated with gangs—want their children to be raised in the church (76-77). The interconnections thus remain complex. In the larger community, some evangelicals may praise God because gangs are deemed as answers to prayers since they provide a level of safety in the neighborhood (78). In another example, Offutt explains how if a son brings

home money that he acquired through gang activities, and the family needs it, the family may simply thank God for the finances. Offutt emphasizes how the relationships remain mutual: for security, evangelicals rely on gangs; for moral reform, gangs reach out to evangelicals (83, 89).

In chapter 4, Offutt explores the relationships between gangs, evangelicals and the police. Collaboration is explained as being stronger between gangs and evangelicals, but less so with the police. Offutt’s mentioning of this triangular situation—and the different ways the three groups navigate power in society—underscores power dynamics in insightful ways (92). He writes: “Whereas gangs and evangelicals are woven into communities through their patrimonial systems, local police officers patrol communities that they do not know and in which they are not trusted” (108). With these ties in view, Offutt presents evangelicals not as escapist, but as deeply engaged with their communities (115).

In Chapter 5, Offutt expands on how gangs and evangelicals work together to negotiate power—drawing from both their street power and church power for some level of local governance. For example, when other authorities fail to provide safety, evangelicals may seek gangs for protection (121). Similarly, evangelicals can offer protection—desiring to help kids from the troubles of the streets (123). Noting the role of pastors, Offutt mentions how gang members often respect and obey such moral authorities (126). Again, power dynamics here takes on a unique role. In these cases Offutt captures how “hard power” and “soft power” interact; in many cases, the hard power of gangs often wins out, but the soft power of the church still survives (126). As an additional and important concept, Offutt also explores how these entangled contexts and situations often create a moral logic characterized by respect and affection (140). In the remaining chapters (6 & 7), with these dynamics in view, Offutt investigates the shared economic exchanges between these two groups, and how church organizations at times may get infiltrated by gang members. These become other lenses through which to explore power dynamics and moral logics as these two cultures bleed into one another.

As a sociological work exploring how these two cultures interact, Offutt reminds us how the relationships between the streets and religion are quite complex. Rather than presenting evangelicalism as a “safe haven” protecting Salvadorians from the volatile nature of gangs, in this ethnographic work we see how

seemingly distinct worlds collide, intermix and become entangled. This work reminds us how religion weaves into urban life in unexpected ways, creating unlikely yet very real relationships. In the process, power and moral dynamics are viewed in a new light.



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