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David Franklin White
You are in for a treat as you delve into this issue of *Insights*! On this occasion we are exploring the topic of spirituality, and are endeavoring to understand that word and its usefulness in our present context. David Johnson, a member of our faculty and a superb pastoral theologian, has written a brilliant analysis of spirituality from a Reformed perspective. I wish it could be put into the hands of every pastor and officer in the church, either in the form of officer training or a church school series. Before you finish reading it, you will have joined David in successfully reeling in the word “spirituality” from the outer edges of religious life, and will have placed it into a new and creative tension with the word “religion.” David is clearly indebted to Robert Wuthnow’s distinction, drawn from his observation of American religious life in the latter half of the twentieth century, between a “spirituality of dwelling” and a “spirituality of seeking.” What David does so well is to argue that a Reformed approach needs both.

Felicity Kelcourse of Christian Theological Seminary offers an excellent companion essay—a reverent and non-judgmental look at spirituality and the seat of honor that it should occupy in religious tradition. Steven Chase of Western Theological Seminary will have you soaring with an unforgettable image of “still prayer,” and you might wonder if there is any setting in which such prayer is not appropriate. Corinne Ware of our neighbor-seminary, the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, adds to the case for an interior life as it inevitably draws us Godward. Our own David White, the Nelson Associate Professor of Christian Education, provides a provocative critique of consumerism as a threat to Christian character and the quality of Christian life. All of these pieces add texture to the tones set by Professor Johnson.

We are grateful as well for the practical input of pastors Mark Greiner and Kris Haig and for the help from an Islamic perspective of an Austin-area imam with a broad interfaith spirit, Umer Esmail. A couple of excellent reviews by Austin Seminary Dean Michael Jinkins and Professor Ismael García round out this issue, and you will want to read it from cover to cover.

So have at it, compliments of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and may your own spirituality be enriched by this issue of *Insights*.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President
Austin Seminary
his essay was born out of a realization and a conviction. The realization was that a particular book, Robert Wuthnow’s *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, which I first read immediately after it was published, helped me understand what I was seeing and experiencing as a local church pastor. The conviction was that the Reformed tradition was not alien to the changing pattern of spirituality that the book described. Rather, that pattern was akin to Reformed spirituality, and the Reformed tradition had resources to offer it.

My intent is to explore the way in which a particular summation of the Reformed tradition can be employed to help guide the searches of people who are expressing or experiencing their spiritual lives as a journey in search of the sacred—to show that the Reformed tradition can act as a kind of map, keeping searchers traveling toward their goal. I will first present Wuthnow’s analysis of American spirituality over the last fifty years. Then, using a brief characterization of the Reformed tradition drawn from the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I will suggest how that Tradition can be used to help point seekers toward that which they seek, and away from those elements that could hinder or divert their search.

**Dwellers and Seekers**

In an age in which regular church attendance appears to be declining, spirituality is almost ubiquitous. But rather than being the personal expression of a religious faith, spirituality is often described as an alternative to it: “spiritual but not reli-
igious” is an increasingly common self-designation. This is puzzling and somewhat troublesome to people who see religious tradition and spiritual practice as inextricably linked to each other. “Spiritual but not religious” sounds something like “breathing without oxygen.” Nevertheless, it seems clear that many people around the globe are finding institutional expressions of religion either irrelevant, unnecessary, or inimical to their spiritual lives.

The book After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s describes a changing pattern in spirituality, from a “spirituality of dwelling” to a “spirituality of seeking.” Over the last half-century spirituality has been less and less tied to a particular sacred space (e.g. a church or synagogue). Instead, it has become for many a movement between sacred spaces—a journey. This change is reflected in the images people use to depict the sacred, in the role of clergy and community, and in the character of the spiritual life itself.

A spirituality of dwelling makes a sharp distinction between ordinary space and sacred space. God is present in sacred space, and God makes room for God’s people in that space. The images of promised land, temple, and king depict such spaces, which are experienced in church buildings, sanctuaries, and the family homes. Through inhabiting such spaces, people find both security and personal identity. Religious professionals function as guardians of such spaces, maintaining them as a secure haven distinct from the world. The spiritual life is a life in which one's identity, both religiously and socially, is realized in participating in a community that is identified with that particular place in which a family dwells (a home) or a community gathers (a sanctuary broadly understood).

A spirituality of seeking, in Wuthnow’s description, is not tied to a particular sacred space. Rather, it moves between sacred spaces, seeking moments of experiences of the divine. Its images are pilgrimage rather than promised land, synagogue rather than temple, prophet rather than priest and king. The spiritual life is an extended search, which can be thoroughly eclectic and only occasionally in community. What is sought is often rather ephemeral—new experiences, new vistas, new glimpses of some “beyond”—in which religious organizations provide resources for the search for the sacred rather than defining a sacred space. The clergy become the purveyors of these resources, while the seekers themselves are much more like customers than inhabitants.

Why has this shift from dwelling to seeking occurred? Wuthnow finds the explanation in the social and intellectual changes in American society during the last half-century. He remarks, “If any single factor can be identified as the source of these changes, it is the increasingly complex social and cultural environment in which Americans live.” Rising prosperity, social and geographical mobility, and intellectual diversity make the searching possible, while suspicion of or disillusionment with established social institutions (including religious institutions) gives it a certain quality of aimless desperation. Seeking itself is not enough to sustain a spiritual life: “A spirituality of seeking … is invariably too fluid to provide individuals with the support they need or to encourage the stability and dedication required to grow spiritually and to mature in character.”

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Dwelling and seeking are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Instead, they are two aspects of the spiritual life, in tension but not opposition. Wuthnow proposes that the two can be united through a third variant: a *spirituality of practice*: “Spiritual practices put responsibility squarely on individuals to spend time on a regular basis worshiping, communing with, listening to, and attempting to understand the ultimate source of sacredness in their lives.”

These practices may be taught through religious traditions and encouraged by religious communities, but they must be performed by individuals if they are to be performed at all. Seeking and practicing are related in that practicing is itself a way of seeking, an attempt to “grow increasingly aware of the mysterious and transcendent aspects of the sacred.” The clergy in this spirituality function as models, rather than gatekeepers or merchants. Their task is to embody the practices and assist others in their development, not to guard the sacred space or dispense the spiritual goods. An emphasis on practice, Wuthnow maintains, will respect the freedom and integrity of the individual seeker, while providing “a more orderly, disciplined, and focused approach to the sacred.”

**THE DILEMMA OF THE CLERGY**

One of the most interesting and provocative aspects of Wuthnow’s analysis is his characterization of the changing role of clergy for dwellers and seekers. A spirituality of dwelling regards the clergy as guardians of the dwelling, a spirituality of seeking regards the clergy as a source of resources for the search, and a spirituality of practice looks to the clergy as models of people who are experienced and adept in the practice. There is hardly a clergyperson alive who has not experienced all three of these role-expectations, and been frustrated and dismayed in attempting to respond to them.

It is the common aspiration of most congregations to “grow”—and particularly to grow by attracting and incorporating “young people,” or more particularly, “young people with families.” Church members tend to see this as much as a necessity for the survival of the congregation as a response to the Great Commission. In Wuthnow’s typology, what they want to do is to turn seekers into dwellers—people who will increase the size of the congregation and help ensure its viability without altering the character of the community.

The seekers may themselves be quite willing to come to the congregation for a time, but their quest will be for a particular kind of experience rather than to unite with a particular people in a particular place. Their experience will not necessarily engender commitment, even if it is a good experience. If they experience rejuvenation and renewal in a particular community, they might simply continue the search in another place.

The clergy will be caught between the two, trying simultaneously to provide resources for the seekers and protection for the dwellers. Meanwhile, they may well be expected to be models of committed spiritual practice when they feel that their own spiritual lives are quite shaky. Pastors themselves need models of spiritual practice, and have a difficult time finding them. It is no wonder that there is a great spiritual hunger in the members of the clergy today. Their congregations are spiritually needy and they themselves are spiritually needy. Where are the resources that will meet this need?
Spirituality and Tradition

Simon Tugwell, one of the most sensible and perceptive contemporary writers on spirituality, has made the following observation: “When people turn away from the church because they find more satisfaction elsewhere, it is important not to assume that we, as Christians [sic], ought to be providing such satisfaction ourselves; it is much more urgent that we take yet another look at just what it is that we have genuinely been given in the church.” The challenge presented by a spirituality of seeking provides the opportunity to take such a look at what we have been given. This “given” lies not only in divine revelation, but also in the tradition that represents the human response to and appropriation of that revelation.

The term “tradition” has a long and not entirely happy history in Christian thought. In its widest sense, it refers to the entire history of Christian reflection—“the form which … Christian doctrine has taken in history,” to use the formula of Jaroslav Pelikan. Often, however, the word has had a more polemical intent—to refer to an authoritative interpretation of Revelation, or to denote a source of revelation (the “oral tradition”) alongside or even superseding the sacred writings. I am using the word in a less universal way than Pelikan, but in a gentler sense than the polemics, to refer to specific ways of being Christian that certain groups of people have articulated and implemented. In this sense, there is a Reformed tradition, emanating primarily from the Swiss Reformation, which stands alongside the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Free Church traditions.

A spirituality of seeking, in Wuthnow’s sense, is often quite uncomfortable with the notion of tradition which seems to smack of intellectual authoritarianism, a set of beliefs imposed from without. But a tradition is not necessarily an instance of intellectual tyranny. It can be seen quite differently.

Traditions are not monolithic or unchangeable. Traditions themselves are pilgrims. They evolve over time, as religious communities and their social contexts change. A religious tradition supplies a way of mediating between the origins of a community, which often carry some kind of authority, and the contemporary challenges the community faces. These traditions can be defined in many ways—through a history, a defined corpus of writings, a thematic description, or simply example and imitation—“this is the way we do things.” However they are characterized, traditions supply continuity over time—but the continuity is always a loose continuity, for the traditions must be reappropriated by each generation, and to a certain extent, each individual. Because each generation and each individual bring new outlooks, new assumptions, new questions, and new problems, traditions can and must be reexamined, rethought, reinterrogated, and reapplied. This will happen as long as people, or at least some people, are convinced that the traditions are or can be ultimately helpful, rather than malignant or simply irrelevant.

Even those who are suspicious of religious traditions have a difficult time doing without them, for the traditions supply the concepts and even the words that allow people to think and talk about spiritual issues. Atheists can generally say quite specific things about the God or gods they reject. If traditions help believers appropriate and
articulate their beliefs, traditions also help unbelievers articulate their denials, and doubters express their doubts. Traditions are inescapable if one is to proceed beyond the level of an inarticulate shrug. To see how they can actually be helpful, we must look at particular traditions in their specificity—in our case, the Reformed tradition—in order to realize anew what it is that we have genuinely been given.

THE REFORMED TRADITION AND THE SPIRITUAL QUEST

Defining the Reformed tradition. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has articulated (and the articulation itself is a form of reappropriation) its own understanding of the Reformed tradition in the two documents of its Constitution: The Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The Book of Confessions defines a corpus—a canon of authoritative writings from the Reformed tradition. The Book of Order articulates a thematic understanding of the Reformed tradition. This will be our central focus.

The Reformed tradition, according to the Book of Order, has as a central affirmation “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love” (G-2.0500a). Related to this are four “great themes of the Reformed tradition”:

1. The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
2. Covenant life marked as a disciplined concern for the order in the church according to the Word of God;
3. A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation;
4. The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God (G-2.0500a).

So characterized, the Reformed tradition is “a particular stance within the history of God’s people” (G-2.0500b). The wording does not claim either exclusivity (“this is the only way of being Christian”) or universality (“this is the way all Christians are Christian”). The only claim is validity: Because it is a way of being Christian, the Reformed tradition is a witness to the entire people of God—the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church—as to what being a Christian might mean. Further, there is nothing in the central affirmation or the four great themes that could not be affirmed by Christians of almost every tradition. The understanding of the Reformed tradition contained in the Book of Order has taken great care to avoid polemic or condemnation, and to rest in positive affirmations that other Christian communions and denominations can share.

How can the affirmation and the great themes be understood as guides for seeking? The answer to this question lies in recognizing that each of them points to a special aspect of liberation. Liberation is always a component of a spiritual search, in both a positive and a negative way. The negative, liberation from, seeks to identify and escape from those aspects of life which enslave or demean one’s spirit (or, to employ alternative terms, one’s true self). A crucial spiritual insight often takes this form: “This thing,
which may once have seemed good and desirable to me, is actually a danger—either because it is harmful in itself, or because I have made it become harmful by giving it too much attention and importance in the living of my life.”

The positive aspect of liberation, liberation for, seeks to identify and embrace that which is of ultimate value in life. Different spiritualities describe this in different ways. Some may speak of “enlightenment,” a new apprehension of the truth of things. Some may offer self-realization or fulfillment, a discarding of false selves in order to free one’s true or real self.

Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, points to a relationship with God as its ultimate value. This relationship, initiated by a loving, creating, and gracious God, is completed by the human response of faith and obedience. The relationship is not in aid of anything else, or for anything else. As a loving response to the source of love, it is the heart of human existence. Liberation from the tyranny of idolatry, coupled with liberation for participation in relationship with the divine, form the essence of Christian spirituality. These are not two liberations, but two aspects of one liberation: a turning toward God which is a simultaneous turning away from treating finite things as divine or ultimate.

All of the characteristics of the Reformed tradition given in the Book of Order involve this double liberation. The affirmation of the sovereignty of God, the central affirmation of the Reformed tradition, entails liberation from the tyranny of the world. The election of the people of God for service, the first of the four themes, leads to liberation from futility. The second theme, covenant life in community gives liberation from isolation. Faithful stewardship is the third theme, which entails liberation from acquisitiveness. The transformation of the world, the last of the four themes, is liberation from despair. Taken together, these aspects of liberation free the one who seeks the transcendent from that which masquerades as the transcendent, and opens one to that which truly is transcendent. We will examine them in turn.

The Sovereignty of God as Liberation from the Tyranny of the World. The central affirmation of the Reformed tradition concerns the nature and activity of God: “Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.” Much of this affirmation is as concerned with the relationship of God to the world as with the intrinsic attributes of the Godhead. While majesty and holiness are characteristics of God, sustaining, ruling, and redeeming have to do with God and the created order. The affirmation posits both God’s rule and God’s love. A godless or a deistic universe are both ruled out, as is an understanding in which God is active in creation but not sovereign over it.

What are the implications of this affirmation for those engaged in a spiritual quest? First of all, it asserts that there is a God to be found, that the quest is not empty or pointless. Furthermore, it insists that God is both loving and working in the world. God is not playing a game of transcendental hide-and-seek.

Finally, this affirmation frees one from idols. Because God rules the world in sov-
ereign love, all other ruling powers become relative. There are, of course, many rulers and many rules in the created order, but none of those can be equated with God's rule. One is therefore free to be in the world, and indeed to love the world, without being enslaved by the world. By helping the seekers realize and understand all that which is not God, seekers are freed to open themselves to the one who is God. Because many seekers' searches proceed by negation—“neither this, nor this, nor that is what I seek”—this affirmation liberates the seekers from false answers, false hopes, and false transcendences. One could reword the affirmation as a maxim for seekers as follows: That which you seek is no object within this world. It is eternally beyond this world, but also eternally present to and at work in this world. Do not halt your search before any worldly thing. That which you seek knows you, loves you, and is working for your good.

Election for Service as Liberation from Futility. Following upon this central affirmation, the first of the four themes characterizing the Reformed tradition is, “The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation.” There is doubtless some degree of discomfort regarding double predestination contained in this theme. It points to God's election as a call to a particular vocation in this life, and not just something having to do with the afterlife. The aid that it provides seekers is this: Seekers do not simply seek the Transcendent; they seek to understand their own lives in relation to the Transcendent. They want to know, in short, what they are to do with the gift of life. This theme, without trying to answer the “what,” which can only be answered one person at a time, does assure them that their life has significance in God's eyes; that they are called to a particular task or series of tasks, and that God is with them as they discover and carry out these tasks. This theme, in short, frees them from any viewpoint that treats earthly life as ultimately futile or meaningless. Turned into a maxim for seekers, this theme might say: You are not only seeking the Transcendent, you are seeking the purpose of your life in relation to that Transcendent. Do not doubt that you are called to a task that is unique and significant, that you will be given all that is necessary to accomplish this task, however long it takes you to find it and do it. And do not doubt that you are more than your task. The one who calls you to work is the one who gives you meaning, hope, love, and healing.

Covenant Life as Liberation from Isolation. One of the paradoxes of contemporary life is the extent to which people are desperately lonely even though they are surrounded by hoards of others. A life that consists of transitory encounters only increases this loneliness. People need a sustained and committed relationship with the entire human family, not just a friend here and there.

The second theme of the Reformed tradition, “Covenant life marked as a disciplined concern for the order in the church according to the Word of God,” narrowly interpreted, is about church polity. Without specifying any particular kind of organizational structure, this theme simply says that church life is governed by scriptural precepts. However, remembering that one of the Great Ends of the Church is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (G-1.0200), order in the church is not only for the sake of the membership. It is a witness to the world. This witness must be
more than simply observing the rules and standards of a given polity. It must be a model of resolving discord, tolerating diversity, treating all people with respect and care because they are beloved children of God. No church manages to do this, of course. But churches witness even in acknowledging and confessing their failures.

“Order in the church according to the Word of God” must be based upon love, for the witness of the Word of God is love. A part of this love is the love of those who seek, whether or not the seekers become actual members of the congregation. Conversely, those who seek and encounter a loving congregation in their searching can discover that they are not simply isolated and atomistic individuals, that their search is a shared search, and that they can receive and return solace along the way. Accordingly, this principle also can become a maxim for seeking: Seek in the company of others, and join your search to theirs. Offer and receive the hospitality of those who share a common need, a common quest, and a common human life. In your seeking, learn to give with generosity, receive with thankfulness, forgive with alacrity, and be forgiven with gratitude.

Faithful Stewardship as Liberation from Acquisitiveness. “A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation,” is the third of the four themes. The key here lies in the phrase, “proper use”: To use the gifts of God’s creation, which is the entirety of God’s creation, is not to deplete or destroy. Such conduct, as the Heidelberg Catechism maintains, is a breaking of the Eighth Commandment (Book of Confessions 4.110) and cannot be justified or condoned with an appeal to Genesis 1:28. Moreover, consumption without restraint or limit kills the spirit. A spiritual seeking necessarily involves a disciplined renunciation of all that consumes us, distracts us, or claims the kind of allegiance we should only give to God. All too often in our culture, people realize that they are spending their time, energy, and financial resources in acquiring and maintaining things—not those things which will maintain our lives, but those things which will maintain our reputations. The Bible is full of warnings about this, as are the spiritual teachings of all the world’s religions. To be able to distinguish between “I need this” and “I want this,” and to live accordingly, is a great liberation. It frees people from being owned by the things they own. Take only what you need for your life and work. Do not let your seeking be encumbered by unnecessary things. Take care not to destroy through carelessness, cruelty, or greed, for you will be destroying yourself as well.

The Transformation of Society as Liberation from Despair. The fourth great theme is this: “The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.” This is akin to the second theme in warning people that their spiritual search is not a matter of individual fulfillment or self-realization. The danger of an idolatry of the self lurks in every spirituality, and the activity of spiritual seeking can degenerate very quickly into sheer self-indulgence.

The Reformed tradition understands seeking justice and working for the transformation of society as spiritual activities. The commandment to love God with all your
heart and the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself are taken to summarize the First and Second Tables of the Law, which define one's duty toward God and toward others.17 Although it is convenient to call one’s duty toward God “spirituality,” and one’s duty toward others “ethics,” the two are inseparable. One can neither fulfill one’s duty to God and ignore one’s neighbor nor fulfill one’s duty to neighbor and ignore God. Spirituality cannot provide the pretext for withdrawing from the needs of the neighbor.

Such withdrawal, when it occurs, is really a form of despair. It is abandoning the world to those powers of idolatry and tyranny which pervert and destroy God’s good creation. We are now in a situation in which the entire planet seems to be jeopardized by the consequences of human hatred and human exploitation. But because God truly sustains, rules, and redeems the world in sovereign righteousness and love, there is always good reason to hope. Anything we are able to do to transform society, no matter how small, will participate in God’s great work. Nothing we are able to do will be lost or wasted. The maxim for seeking based on this final theme is this: Your seeking is not a way of evading or ignoring the needs of the world. It is a way of responding to them. You will meet your neighbor in God, and God in your neighbor. They are not identical, but they dwell together.

**SUMMING UP: A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY**

A spirituality of dwelling will use tradition as a sort of blueprint—a means of defining the sacred space. A spirituality of seeking will use tradition in a way that is more like using a map—a tool that can keep one pointed toward (or at least aware of) that which is sought—and also contains the ancient warning, “Here Be Dragons.” The Central Affirmation of the Reformed tradition, “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love,” points to the One for whom we search, and in so doing, guides us away from the tyranny of the world. The four themes of the Reformed tradition that accompany the Central Affirmation all point to liberation: from futility, from isolation, from acquisitiveness, and from despair. These four *liberations from* are all part of the movement I have characterized as *liberation for*: a relationship in which we respond to God’s loving grace with our loving faith. This is what it means to seek as a Christian—all the while knowing that there is another, greater map available in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, who not only guides our seeking but is our goal.

This essay has been an attempt to articulate the teachings of the Reformed tradition, as expressed in the *Book of Order*, in such a way that they will help guide a generation of spiritual seekers. I am convinced that religious tradition—in this case, the Reformed tradition—can help people understand both what they are seeking, and what it means to seek. It can be a map for the journey, rather than a blueprint for a theological or doctrinal dwelling. Of course, having a map is not the same thing as making the journey. Our loving response to God’s loving grace is the work of a lifetime, and no espousal of tradition will substitute for that work.

I am also convinced that the Reformed tradition, as articulated in the section of
the *Book of Order* which we have been examining, is not alien to or isolated from the broader Christian tradition. I am speaking on the basis of the Reformed tradition to all Christians of any tradition. Finally, I am convinced that all are seekers, even the dwellers. The seeking is coextensive with life itself, and is not done until life itself is done.

I would like to say a final word to those pastors who find themselves trying simultaneously to be guardians, resources, and models. You also are seekers, and you will do yourselves and your congregations much harm if you ignore your own search. The prayer of Psalm 27, “Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me,” is the daily prayer of every Christian, including Christians who are among the clergy. This prayer has been answered, is answered, and will be answered every day, for the God we seek has come among us with this promise: “I am with you always.” That is the heart of your ministry. Everything else is secondary.

NOTES


2. *The Gallup International Millennium Survey*, which polled 50,000 people in 60 countries, makes the following conclusion: “The poll reveals that in spite of the high proportion of people who say they belong to some religious faith [87% worldwide, 91% in North America], their beliefs are not channeled through ‘institutional’ or established practices of worship but is [sic] rather expressed as a personal relationship with God by means of meditation or praying in solitude for example. Seven out of ten respondents say they regularly engage in such practices.” http://www.gallup-international.com/ContentFiles/millennium15.asp.

3. Wuthnow defines “spirituality” as follows: “Spirituality consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals seek to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality.” Wuthnow, viii.

4. Wuthnow, 11. Three years later, this complexity was increased enormously by the events of September 11, 2001.

5. Ibid., 16.


7. Ibid., 17.

8. Ibid., 196.


Pelikan defines “doctrine” as, “What the Christian Church believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the Word of God,” 1.


12. The *Book of Confessions* consists of eleven works: The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds; The Scots Confession; The Heidelberg Catechism; The Second Helvetic Confession; The Confession, Larger, and Shorter Catechisms from Westminster; The Barmen Declaration; The Confession of 1967; and the Brief Statement of Faith. These are judged to be “subordinate standards” in relation to Scripture (*Book of Order* G-2.0200). Some have proposed adding the French Confession to the *Book of Confessions*, principally on the grounds that a writing of Calvin’s ought to be included, but so far this has not happened. It is noteworthy that this list includes pre-Reformation standards in the form of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, thus indicating that the Reformed tradition is not limited to Reformation and post-Reformation writings.

13. This particular way of characterizing the Reformed tradition is admittedly rather arbitrary, although I hope not quixotic. It has the practical advantage of being quite brief, whereas most of the documents in the *Book of Confessions* are much too lengthy to be used in this project. In addition, this understanding does carry a certain authority, at least among Presbyterians. I am sure that projects similar to this one could be carried out using very different formulae. I only want to show what can be done in relating what it is we have been given to what it is that the seekers are seeking.


15. The doctrine of double predestination, which one can find in various forms in Calvin’s work, in the Westminster Confession, and in many other central works of Reformed Theology, holds that God determines both those who will be saved and those who will be damned before creation, without reference to foreseen merit or any factor other than God’s own divine will.

16. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (NRSV)”

17. See the discussion of the Ten Commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism, beginning with 7.201 in the *Book of Confessions*. 
You hint in your article that each of the three models of spirituality (spirituality of dwelling, spirituality of seeking, and spirituality of practice) can become idolatrous. Can you say more about this?

The idolatry I have encountered most often is associated with spiritualities of dwelling. I have known several congregations with beautiful, beautiful sanctuaries. But they have tended to treat the space as though it had some kind of magical power to evoke the presence of the divine. When a space is working, I would say, it doesn't bring God in. Rather, it does something to your openness. So that, with Jacob, we suddenly realize that “God is in this place and I did not know it!”

The idolatry associated with a spirituality of seeking confuses the search with the object of the search. This kind of idolatry seems to happen all the time—people seem to become almost addicted to spiritual experiences. One more mountaintop experience, one more high—the danger is that the experience as such is worshiped, rather than that which is experienced.

The idolatry associated with a spirituality of practice is evident when the practice becomes an end in itself and not a means to an end. All of these spiritualities, in my mind, have to be a way of opening you up or else they fail.

What do you mean by “opening you up”?

We talk about the search in general, but there are different kinds of searches. You might be searching for enlightenment, or some sort of self-realization, or just “something more”—and people will lump all those searches together under the term “spirituality.”

Specifically, Christian spirituality is concerned with a relationship. The relationship with God is the point of the search, not happiness or peace of mind or prosperity or any of that—although happiness or peace of mind might come from it. (Prosperity is a bit more problematic.) That, to me, is what Christian spirituality is all about: a relationship that is at the center of your being. The cultivation of the relationship from the human side depends on the divine being present and open and accessible. I would consider Christian spirituality to be opening oneself up to a relationship with God as a response to God's love. I've got a more Reformed definition of spirituality, and I think it's similar.

What is it?

It's the content of the Great Commandment. What does it mean to love the Lord God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and your strength? In the Reformed tradition, spirituality and spiritual practices are almost always discussed in relationship
to the First Table of the Law. The First Table shows us what it means to love God. And the reason I think spirituality and ethics are so closely tied in the Reformed tradition is because it understands that the love of neighbor—the second part of the Great Commandment—is the Second Table of the Law. They go together; there is no either/or.

In those terms, idolatry happens any time you treat anything other than God as the central relationship in your life. I think that’s one of the points where Paul Tillich is fairly close to the Reformed tradition. He’s right to ask us what our “ultimate concern” is. One thing that I kind of worry about in relationship to modern society is that people seem to live entire lives without having an ultimate concern. Instead of talking to the Lord as our ultimate concern, we can just turn on the TV and escape.

In your essay you draw on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*, so I’ll ask: what idolatries do you think the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) needs to repent of, these days?

I think that there is a Presbyterian variation on the idolatry of practice that has to do with getting caught up in our processes as such. We need to remember that the Presbyterian Church got along without a *Book of Order* for a long time. It is certainly idolatrous when the *Book of Order* is used as a club to beat somebody with.
You mention that pastors often find themselves becoming spiritually needy. Are pastors aware of their own spiritual neediness, and if they are, what should they do about it?

I think that most pastors are very aware of it, but they don’t quite know what to do about it. Actually, that’s one of the things that our own certificate in spiritual formation program has done—it has helped a lot of pastors find a place to talk about their spiritual neediness.

Would you say “spiritual neediness” is a synonym for “burnout”?

No, but I think that it’s one of the factors that leads to burnout. Because if you look at the data, the three factors that indicate a pastor is really in trouble are high stress (and most pastors have that!), a poor support system, and a deteriorating spiritual life. And you put those three together and you have somebody who is in one way or another in deep, deep trouble. And that can manifest itself in various forms of misconduct, in leaving the ministry, in substance abuse, or in feeling that—year after year after year—you live a life of quiet desperation.

“Quiet desperation”?

Thoreau’s phrase, but it fits. For example, I’ve heard a lot of pastors say they only pray when they are in front of their congregations, and the only time they read their Bible is in preparation for their sermon. The rest of the time, they’re either too busy or too tired. But they know that they’re going dry. Another aspect of the problem is that pastors are modern people and they share in modern skepticism. That’s all around us—in our present climate, simply believing is like walking against the wind.

Especially believing in something that can’t be measured.

Or that would require a life-shaking commitment. Our culture seems to believe that no commitment is worth your life.

What expectations do congregations have about their pastors’ spirituality?

The expectation of the congregation is not necessarily that you will help them in their spirituality, but it is that you will have one. You as a pastor are close to God—that’s just assumed. And part of what happens when pastors don’t feel close to God, while their congregations continue to expect them to be close to God, is that they start faking their own spiritual lives. We pastors often project an intimacy with God that we simply don’t feel. And, when we do, we know in our souls that we are lying to others about what should be the most basic thing in our lives as pastors.

And what’s the alternative to this? Should pastors tell members of their congregations about their spiritual neediness?

I think the alternative is, somehow, to find a safe place. There are some things it wouldn’t be helpful to fully disclose to your congregation. The good thing is that, if you do a little looking, there are a lot of safe places around. One of the things that has happened is that Catholic monasticism has found a new vocation in taking care of people in spiritual distress—you go to them and you stay with them for awhile. You can do a
week’s retreat, or find a spiritual director, or read a lot of books and ask a lot of ques-
tions. And they will help you. Some are of course better than others, but there are
resources out there. It doesn’t take a lot of looking, but it does take some looking—they
don’t come to you.

I also think it would help if people’s view of pastors were less idealized. People need
to allow pastors the freedom to err and sin and say, “I don’t know,” and to not always
have to be a non-anxious presence. They need to allow the humanity of pastors with-
out feeling threatened by it. But I don’t know how that’s going to happen. I honestly
don’t.

I can see how the idealization of pastors is an issue. But it seems like we also have
the opposite problem—folks seeing pastors as “so human” that they are unwilling
to grant them any spiritual authority.

I see this as the clergy version of the “Madonna/Whore Syndrome.” Pastors must be
perfect, some people think, or they are worthless as spiritual guides. Again, if folks
would only see pastors as human, with human strengths and human weaknesses, called
to a particular role, they could accept the pastors as spiritual guides without demand-
ing that pastors be spiritually perfect.

You were a pastor, David, for years. What was your secret for maintaining spiritu-
al health?

First, I want to make clear that I think spirituality looks very different for different peo-
ple. What worked for me won’t necessarily work for everyone. There is an image from
the early church of people standing on the rim of a wheel. God is at the center and they
are all moving closer to God. As they move closer to God they are at the same time
moving down the spokes closer to each other. The people on one side of the wheel are
moving exactly the opposite way of those on the other side of the wheel. So it’s not that
everybody is going in the same direction, it’s that everybody is proceeding in different
directions toward the same goal.

My own spiritual journey has always included a lot of reading. One of my favorite
author/mentors has been Thomas Merton. The thing that really proved to be a turning
point in my journey, though, was a program in the Presbyterian Church called The
Company of Pastors. The program invites people to commit themselves to the simple
spiritual discipline of prayer and scripture reading three times a day. So I signed up for
it, when I was a pastor, and they sent me the book and the little snazzy plaque and
everything. I happened to be on vacation when I started the daily prayer and scripture
reading, and so I was away from the church for two weeks. By the time I was back in
the church this pattern was established in my life. What I discovered was that initially
it took energy to do it. And then, after the pattern was established, it took energy not
to do it.

You established a pattern in two weeks?
Well, at least enough of a pattern that when I got back, I kept going.

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My Friend Alec

I have a good friend, Alec, who is 11 years old. When we spend time together it is often out of doors where his powers of attentiveness to the world around him humbles and inspires me. I wish I could pay attention to the simplicity as well as the lush complexity of nature, to what Calvin called the “theater of God’s glory,” as Alec seems to do so naturally. He has, for instance, shown me what looks to be a very human-like face at the tip of quarter inch “rolly-polly” or pillbug. He once sliced open the tough green husk of a Black Walnut fruit, insisting that I spend a moment inhaling its fragrance, then suggesting the benefits of this nut as a natural car freshener. He has shared with me the refreshing tastes of Sassafras and Wintergreen. Hearing a Common Flicker well before I can, he points it out from amongst the shadows and heavy brouns of its tree in an instant. On a number of occasions he has spent a good five minutes emptying his pockets of insects, all still alive (for the most part!) as they variously drop to the ground, crawl down his pant-leg, or fly away.

If attentiveness, watchfulness, noticing are a kind of prayer, my friend Alec does a lot of praying. Actually, Alec and I are in good company in believing that awareness and wakefulness are prayer: our own Christian desert fathers and mothers thought the same; in fact they taught the ancient arts of attentiveness (prosochi) and watchfulness (nipsis) as aids to constant, contemplative prayer. Spending time with the ever attentive and watchful Alec started me thinking about constant prayer in a new way. Perhaps there is an additional way of practicing constant prayer I had not considered. I’ll let Alec wander the earth for a spell while we explore some things he already knows. We will return to him later.

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Constant Prayer

The apostle Paul is pretty clear about our call to constant prayer. He writes in his letter to the Romans, “be constant in prayer” (12:12) and in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (5:16-18). These are not suggestions; Paul admonishes us in the imperative. Throughout the centuries, Christian spiritual traditions have taken Paul very seriously and in a variety of ways. In all of this variety, constant prayer has been undertaken in the spirit of joy, humility of heart, and desire for the Lord, but also with a clear recognition of human suffering, sin, and frailty. However, where our steps falter, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). With that essential confession of human weakness in mind and the Spirit’s willingness to intercede on our behalf when we cannot, Christian practices intended to respond honestly to Paul’s imperative to pray without ceasing have included:

- The divine office or praying the liturgy of the hours.
- Imitation of or participation in Jesus Christ.
- The practice of constant consciousness or awareness of the presence of God.
- Grounded in the Beatitudes, watchfulness, attentiveness, and alertness in cultivating purity of heart.
- Following Paul’s own example of giving thanks in all things to God (1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 1:16; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; Phil. 1:3-4).
- The Holy Spirit bearing witness and interceding on our behalf (Rom. 8:16, 26-27).
- An on-going prayer of “recollection” resulting in the habit (habitus) of virtue.
- Hesychasm (stillness or quiet), also known as “Jesus Prayer,” “Prayer of the Heart,” or “Breath Prayer.”
- A global, communal, ecclesial sense in which as members of the body of Christ, the global church is in constant prayer, somewhere, at all times.

Our own reformer, John Calvin, frames the issue of constant prayer in terms of the vicissitudes and uncertainties of life: “For however much after our heart’s desire affairs may prosperously flow and occasion for happiness surround us on all sides, still there is no point of time when our need does not urge us to pray.”

The invitation to unceasing prayer, indeed the necessity of unceasing prayer, is in fact the chief part of our gratitude to God (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 116).

Yet, even given the reality of this gratitude, the very idea of constant prayer can be daunting, even frightening to the point of a kind of paralysis in prayer. Fortunately, in addition to the Spirit, wise and gentle guides inevitably surface and accompany us along the way. God has a way of providing just such counsel as needed if we are “attentive” to divine conversation, even if the conversation of the moment is one of silence and longing. For instance, Simon Tugwell “surfaced” for me at a particularly unsettled
time with words that broke through a wall I had set around prayer. Tugwell simply reminded me that to pray constantly means at times that we must pray trivially. With that comment Tugwell diffused what had become a burdensome obligation with truth, even gratitude, and humor. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh also showed up at a particularly critical time for me when I was looking for miracles in all the wrong places. There are two ways to wash dishes, he notes: the first is to wash dishes in order to have clean dishes; the second is to wash dishes in order to wash dishes. The kicker: “The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth.” Yes! A prayer to walk on earth in order to … walk on earth … a miracle! Walking thusly on green earth, I also found myself guided by following the footsteps of Samuel as he himself walked with the Lord upon our same earth “[letting] none of the Lord’s words fall to the ground” (1 Samuel 3:19).

Ask the Animals
Back now to Alec. Alec, too, in his beguiling innocence, is one of these same wise guides God has set in my path of prayer. “Duh,” as my own daughter, Rachel, might say: nature itself constitutes constant prayer, the earth and all that dwells therein. I should have seen this myself, but I didn’t. I apparently needed Alec’s eyes to see clearly the miracle of the earth as it is. Alec, that is, and the voices of the animals, birds, plants, fish who also long so to speak to us of gratitude, of joy, of prayer in words they never let fall to the ground:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

- Job 12:7-8

Why was I so slow? Who can say why we fail to recognize the miracle of God’s clear voice speaking through animals and birds, insects, plants and fish? I confess I do not know the answer to these things; but I do know now that nature is itself in constant prayer. And as I recognize that I am no more nor no less than animal, bird, plant, or fish in the vast and intricate fabric of nature, created by God, for the glory of God, I think I hear what Alec hears. Let me try to show you a little of what I think he hears.

Stilling Time
I have other special friends in the community of creation: the general class of birds known as raptors, especially diurnal birds of prey, and especially among these the lovely, hovering Kestrels, the deadly Sharp-shinned and Coopers hawks, those wonderful marsh hoverers the Northern Harrier, desert-fond Prairie falcons and Swainsons hawks,
peerless Peregrines, and the ubiquitous but always delightful Red-tailed hawks. One nocturnal raptor I should also acknowledge is the Great Snowy owl, though they hunt as well during the day and so I was lucky enough to spot one just outside its normal range one particularly harsh winter, but only because of the red blood of a recent kill that splattered the snow. Many more are rare friends, but these named I see more often and remember most fondly. The fire of God’s imagination blazes in them and more than once these birds have allowed me to see a bit of the flame. When I see no flame, the birds themselves are bold and majestic unto themselves, and I am happy just to catch a moment’s glimpse of them alone in the fire of their own majesty.

One Red-tailed hawk in particular taught me about “stilling” as constant prayer. There is a small but notable annual southern migration of hawks and falcons on the west coast that follows the coastline of California and is funneled into a narrow area by the northern peninsula that defines the upper reaches of the San Francisco Bay on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. All manner of migrating raptors, preferring land routes as they do, are naturally funneled toward the Golden Gate by this peninsula. Many take an opportunity to rest awhile by circling on the updrafts created by the Marin Headlands that form the southern tip of the peninsula just before they make their flight across the narrow gate of water as they then continue south toward secret nestings.

Some species, however, rest by a flight pattern known as “stilling.” To still, a hawk will turn her body into the wind with wings extended and locked in place and with feathers spread. The wind in this area is stiff and shifting, yet through a variety of subtle shifts in wing, feathers, and tail she is able to remain perfectly still relative to the ground. She will set her wings to a slight tilt or angle to the wind which thereby secures just the proper pitch crucial for stability and balance. She fans her tail. Her feathers—which seem a vast community in perfect harmony—variously judge and correct for shifts in wind by alternately hugging and thus streamlining her body or flaying out so as to create the slight but needed drag to keep her perfectly still. Her eyes search deep into the horizon. Every muscle obeys her purpose of stillness.

One late fall day during the migration I climbed to the top of the Headlands. In a very short time I noticed that a Red-tailed adult female hawk was “stilling” directly above me. Though familiar among birders who watch raptors with a special enthusiasm, this “stilling” posture is not all that common and so I was really quite excited to see it. To top it off, the Headlands at this point rise jagged and abrupt above the Bay and Pacific, and so the Red-tailed hawk was not far above me, no more than fifteen or twenty feet at the most. Even without my binoculars I could make out individual feathers that would be whipped away by the wind then brought quickly back into formation with the rest. I could easily make out each feather of the wing and of the tail as they adjusted just slightly from moment to moment to make allowance for the shifting wind. Every nerve and muscle was attentive, ready. Yet in her practiced flight she was still: still to the wind, still to the earth, an anchor in the sky.

And in the moment I knew that this was certainly prayer. Sharply alert, vigilant, every fiber and feather was in play, yet she was perfectly at rest, perfectly still. Stillness
in motion. My hawk was “stilling time.” She was in a very real sense stopping time, making sabbatical time, stilling time to a new way of time. She was also telling me that she and I gathered at precisely this place because we needed times when time was still and that we had come because it was time to still time. In stilling time, I now realize, she showed me constant prayer, an on-going prayer of connection and relation to the earth, nature, to others, to myself, and to God. Then with one quick dip of a wing she broke her pattern and ripped across the Golden Gate and time resumed, but prayer did not stop.

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling the Lord’s command!
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle
creeping things and flying birds!

- Psalm 148:1, 7-10

And thank you, Alec (and Rachel before him) and sister Red-tailed hawk, fire and hail, and snow and frost for speaking, without letting the Lord’s words fall to the ground, of the nature of constant prayer.

NOTES
1. The theology, history, individuals, and practices associated with these forms of prayer are detailed in Steven Chase, The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 22-30.

2. Calvin, Institutes, 3.20.7. The longest chapter in all of Calvin’s Institutes is, surprisingly to some, this chapter on prayer.

3. See Simone Tugwell, Prayer in Practice (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1974), 7


5. The section that follows appears in somewhat altered form in “Acknowledgments” to The Tree of Life, 9-11.
I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” Perhaps someone, a co-worker or acquaintance, has said this to you. What do people mean by opposing spirituality and religion? The phrase implies that religion is somehow suspect while spirituality is not.

On the other hand, many theological educators deplore the word “spirituality” as being hopelessly vague. Their distaste for the term suggests that someone claiming to be spiritual but not religious is indecisive or ill-informed, unwilling to commit to the rigors of a specific religious tradition.

In these reflections I offer a middle ground, one that acknowledges both the relatively indeterminate connotations of the word “spirituality,” with all the difficulties indeterminacy entails, while acknowledging the wealth of positive meanings that spirituality may carry in the context of popular culture. Certainly, theological educators engaged in training the next generation of ministers, Christian educators, youth workers, chaplains, and pastoral counselors, cannot afford to divorce themselves from the currents in popular culture that ministers need to address. The term “spirituality,” with all its varied connotations, should commend itself to the attention of seminary faculty as well as religious workers of all descriptions for this reason, if for no other.

Ironically, three out of four dictionary definitions of spirituality link the term to religion as follows: 1) something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church; 2) clergy; 3) sensitivity or attachment to religious values; and 4) the quality or state of being spiritual. Assuming that the fourth definition is closest to what most people mean when they claim to be spiritual but not religious, we need to begin by taking a closer look at what “being spiritual” may be about. What does spirituality actually mean in its popular sense?

As I teach seminarians preparing for service in congregational ministry and pas-
toral counseling, I link the concept of spirituality to the concept of faith. Using James W. Fowler’s definition of faith as the ability to make and find meaning in our lives, I believe that spirituality, like faith, is a quality of human experience no one can do without. A person who has completely lost the capacity for faith would be either suicidal or homicidal; life loses its value without faith. Spirituality can be understood as the intuitive counterpart of faith, since faith has more rational connotations in Fowler’s usage.

Why do so many people feel a sense of awe before the beauty of nature, when overcome with feelings of love, or before life’s portals of birth and death? Spirituality points to those dimensions of human experience that do not easily lend themselves to cognitive categories or descriptions but are nevertheless profoundly moving. In the context of spiritual direction, spirituality refers to a marriage of religious traditions and religious experience. This marriage transcends the false dichotomies drawn between our sense of what is numinous, on the one hand, and the religious traditions that have striven to bring order and structures of meaning to the implacability of change and loss, on the other.

Every religious tradition worthy of the name has mystery at its heart. All our creeds, affirmations of faith, and ways of naming God are simply human attempts to respond to the felt sense of both grace and mystery that must suffuse all but the most cursory evaluations of human experience. Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? What does God want me to do with my life? How will I know? These sorts of questions are common in seminary contexts and often inform the spiritual hunger of those who gravitate to congregations as well, whether articulated or not. When I’m asked such questions in the context of a classroom, workshop, or counseling session, I often ask the questioner to tell me what they already know that might inform their response. What meaning do words like love, faith, grace, and God have for them? How have they come to terms with these meanings, whether positive or negative in their experience?

I think that when people contrast spirituality with religion they are attempting to claim what is numinous and meaningful to them, not in terms of specific creeds or religious traditions but in terms of their own lives. The statement “I’m spiritual but not religious” affirms that questions of meaning and value are important, even though the speaker may have a limited appreciation of the wealth of religious experience that is contained in religious traditions, including the lives of the saints, the “cloud of witnesses” that many seminarians and thoughtful lay people claim.

When theological educators and others take umbrage at the false opposition of spirituality and religion, they lose sight of the fact that, for many, religious communities and religious traditions have been a source of wounding rather than a means of grace. As a pastoral counselor I tend to encounter three groups of counselees: 1) those whose faith is articulate and significant in their lives; 2) those who have been wounded by the church; and 3) those who have no structured tradition to house their often vague understandings of faith. The first group seeks me out because they trust I will honor the language and traditions of faith that are meaningful in their lives. The second group, despite lingering anger for the damage caused by religious people and religious communities, generally acknowledges the need to reestablish contact with some
form of faith community in order to be healed. The third group intuitively recognizes a lack in their lives for which they have no words. These last two groups have a great deal to gain by reestablishing a link between their own felt sense of faith and the traditions of faith handed down through the ages. These traditions, at their best, can give voice to seekers’ longings, whether to counteract negative teachings that instilled fear, to liberate those who have suffered abuse, or to give voice to desires that cannot fully be addressed in the absence of a relationship with God. The first group, claiming religious values as positive, may still need to reassess the language of faith they have been given in light of their own spiritual imagery and felt awareness of the divine.

If religion is the structure of language and tradition that houses spirituality, and if spirituality is the lived experience of people who claim a positive reliance on the faith of their understanding, then religion without spirituality is dead and spirituality without religion is formless. I urge theological educators, pastors, and others cognizant of both the wealth and deficits of religious tradition not to shun the phrase “spiritual but not religious” but to welcome it as an expression of intent. Spiritual longing without structure can find containment given a little education. But adherence to religious tradition that does not continually feed on the passionate flames of “faith seeking understanding” will soon grow cold as an empty form, a lifeless husk. Give me “spiritual but not religious” over “religious but not spiritual” any day.

NOTES

3. This phrase is attributed to St. Anselm, who also said “I believe that I may understand.”
While working as a pastoral counselor at a Samaritan Center in Missouri, I was invited by the St. Joseph downtown clergy group to speak to them on “What is Spirituality?” They were being asked by church members for more of “it,” and were not sure how to respond. I asked this group of twenty-five clergy, representing about seven denominations, if any of them had taken courses in ascetical theology while in seminary. None, not one, had had such a course and one person asked me how to spell “ascetical.” This happened about fifteen years ago and much has changed. Whereas ten years ago two or three students in the seminary where I teach asked me to recommend a spiritual director for them, now over a third of my class makes that request. Church members and seminary students are asking for an enriched offering from us as pastors, priests, and professors. We, for our part, are wondering both about the legitimacy of these demands and how best to meet them.

You may have noticed in your reading of books on spirituality that, though each author attempts to offer a definition of what it is, no definition is ever the same as another. How can we be serious about a subject on which there is so little agreement as to what is being studied? Although ascetical theology is now being taught more than in the past, it is taught in very different ways: historically, experientially, developmentally, etc. I am brash enough here to offer my own definition, or should I say definitions, because I think the subject—spirituality—is about two things. First, it is about the practices that open us to the felt presence of God. Second, spirituality refers to our yearning for God. Each of these definitions suggests ways of binding ourselves to the Holy.

Spiritual practices are what we do, usually on a regular basis, to draw our attention to God’s presence. Essentially, spirituality is about prayer, if we broadly define prayer as facing Godward (through liturgy, silence, gestures, etc.). There are dozens of ways in

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which to pray or direct our attention toward God. What people often want, when they ask for more “spirituality” in our programs, is both to learn about these corporate and private practices and to try them out.

The second definition of spirituality has to do with the universal yearning that we as humans have for the transcendent. Of all God’s creatures, we are the only ones who strive for union with what is greater than ourselves. As important as it is to know about God, what people deeply want is an experience of God. It is this that people mean when they say, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” It is the postmodern mantra of our deconstructed world.

Despite the progress of the last ten to fifteen years, the fostering of the experience of God is little attended to in typical religious life. How is it that we came to this, that access to the spiritual life is no longer thought to reside in the traditional church? The suspicion that religion as we have known it will not nourish inner life is one explanation for the shrinking church. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan says that “by reducing mystery to reason and by flattening transcendence into common sense, the rationalism of the Enlightenment [has] dethroned superstition only to enthrone banality.”

We have only to turn on reality TV to know how banal we have become. Television’s counseling guru, Dr. Phil, has a now famous phrase. When someone explains to him and the audience how they have tried and tried and tried to make a relationship work and it is still dysfunctional, Dr. Phil says, “So how’s that workin’ for ya?” His question makes it obvious to the viewer that past patterns of behavior are not solving the problems. Learning what it is that is missing, what need is not being met, is the real solution. So long as our primary goals are to maintain the familiar or to add to the church membership roll, legitimate as these goals are, the church will remain stuck. We will have found the right path when our chief concern rises to, How can we move more fully into companionship with God and to the service to others, just as we see Jesus doing in the Gospels? Our spiritual yearning is a need that asks to be met in ways that work.

Living with lesser goals makes us uneasy, even despondent. Our spiritual yearning rises from the fact that we are wired for meaning and for purpose. God has created each of us for loving union with the Holy and with each other. In our disconnectedness and darkness, we look for light. We yearn for what we are currently calling “spirituality.” The church too much reflects the culture when we no longer speak of our own spiritual experiences. We either don’t expect to have them or we think that mentioning such things will heap ridicule on our heads. This observation is not a call to anti-intellectualism. Rather, it is a call for seeing the reality of the whole person. We need our spirits fed as well as our minds. It is the tension and balance that works.

Organized western Christianity is beginning to be interested in the spiritual formation of its constituents. Seminaries are increasingly including a course or two in spiritual development. Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the publisher of Insights, has a program in spiritual formation for clergy who want to learn about how to support spiritual life in the church. My own seminary (the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest) has made the spiritual formation course a requirement for the MDiv
degree and has added some elective courses in spiritual studies. As to church leaders, more and more of them are creating education opportunities for spiritual growth. Recently I actually heard a sermon on the Holy Spirit that was preached on a day other than Trinity Sunday!

We as church leaders are beginning to realize that our interior lives impact our ministries as much as our exterior lives. This trend will require some changes and may tempt us to wonder if programmatic shifts are really all that is necessary. Somewhere in the long ago past we recall having been told that if we hope to offer spiritual help to others, we must first find that life within ourselves. We are now faced with the fact that in order to lead God’s people to a deeper spiritual life, we must be able to show them that path being carried out in our own lives. To commit to a path of personal growth, you and I must be convinced that the discomfort that always accompanies change will be worth it.

What if the current enthusiasm for spirituality is simply a fad, something that will have its day and fade away in a few years? Are we simply being religiously correct to be committed to it? Is the study and practice of the inner life “theology lite?” Some of what we are seeing as an expression of spirituality will indeed pass away. If the spirituality served to you makes no demands on your life, asks for no changes, and magically glosses over painful realities, you can be sure it is “theology lite.” Along with the joy and the peace that is promised, there must also be the reality of the God who is with us in adversity. Much that is offered today is not well grounded in our biblical understandings and some of it is downright flaky. Such theologies do not meet the deep yearning we have to participate in the mystery of God which we find in ourselves and in society, and it is this deeper part to which we must give attention. I believe that the yearning for God is not a temporary fad but is an enduring part of every human being.

A healthy church is one that connects society to God, via its own God-connection. As we know, the word “religion” is from the Latin _re-ligio_ which means “to re-bind.” Our task is to permeate an uncommitted society and re-bind it to the purpose and meaning God intends. We will need to study spiritual texts and pray deeply and long as we find new ways to reconnect with a jaded population. By engaging in religious practice and mentoring others in the experience of God, we bless all we serve and bring to ourselves the yearned-for vitality of Spirit.

NOTES
Pastors’ Panel

We asked church leaders to reflect on how they attend to their spirituality. Here is what they told us:

What is your own spiritual practice?

Mark Greiner, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Baldwin, New York

Annually I do a silent retreat for one of my two continuing education weeks. One of the things I greatly appreciate about Presbyterian tradition is that we expect our clergy to engage in continuing spiritual education. But I do find it striking that we refer to it as “continuing education” rather than “spiritual development.”

Umer Esmail, Imam, North Austin Muslim Community Center, Austin, Texas

The angel Gabriel came to the prophet Muhammad and asked him, “What is worship?” The prophet answered by saying that you worship God as if you are actually looking at him. And that’s the highest level. If you cannot see him, the lower level is that you worship knowing that God is watching you. This can be translated as proficiency in everything that you do, excellence in everything that you do. Islam teaches us that even earning is an act of worship, marriage is an act of worship, bearing children is an act of worship. So all this constitutes spirituality.

Kris Haig, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Morgantown, West Virginia

I try to find ways to keep Sabbath even if I can’t have a full day off. I appreciate the value of retreats, some place where somebody else is in charge, and I am ministered to. For my quiet time, I value a couple of different practices: one is being in nature. Music and art are part of my Sabbath. There’s a prayer that a rabbi shared with us to begin the Sabbath, “Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles.” And that to me is enlightenment. A wonderful ritual of the Sabbath is the Sabbath box: when people come into the household, they leave anything that signifies a commitment to anything other than God—your wristwatch, your cell phone, your pager, your Palm Pilot—I’m just going to put that aside. The cultivation of spiritual discipline is a freeing act.

How do you encourage spiritual practice in your congregations?

Mark Greiner

There’s a lovely little quote in Richard Foster’s book, Prayer: “Pray as you can, not as you cannot.” People are wired so very differently—we are variously and wondrously made. So, for some people, very physical forms of prayer work quite well. For other people, aesthetic means of expression or appreciation or cognitive forms of prayer are
effective ways, so I don’t think that there is one size that fits all.

A number of folks are very comfortable with what we do week in and week out. That works for them—particularly I would say older adults. For younger adults and their kids, it’s less satisfying. For them, service really speaks.

People in my congregation really like the fruit of my practice. They don’t necessarily understand the practice. They are not necessarily curious about the practice, but they appreciate the fruit of it. It’s as if I’m a tuning fork that is sending out reverberations. But how can I help more people come along on this journey?

UMER ESMAIL

The whole purpose and aim of worship is the attainment of nearness to God. Awareness of God will lead a person to living a peaceful life, a life that will lead him closer and closer to God. Whether in private or in public, when he is aware that God is watching him all the time, then he will not do something that will displease God.

Other than the daily prayer, reciting verses of the Qu’an, and statements of the prophet, I encourage being good to your neighbors, to those who are next to you. They want to see it from me; they want to see me interact with other people from other faiths. Sometimes, mentioning verses of the Qu’an and statements of the Prophet are not sufficient. I have to demonstrate it to the people. I have to become the model.

There’s a couplet in Arabic, that the Lover is obedient to the Beloved. So we follow the example of Muhammad in everything, the way he ate, the way he drank. So, things like wearing the turban, keeping the beard—by following these things you inculcate the love of the Prophet and you’re closer to God. Even following minor symbols, the habits of the Prophet will enhance your spirituality.

KRIS HAIG

You model it. There are other things beyond that, but if you don’t model it, then you’re wasting your time. Two things that I think are essential for pastors to model: one is Sabbath-keeping, which is very hard for pastors because Sunday cannot be their Sabbath, and learning some form of contemplative prayer, some practice that cultivates interior stillness. Calvin says, “Prayer is none other than an expanding of our heart in the presence of God.” It doesn’t say anything about words or conversation or specific actions; it’s an interior disposition of the heart, an availability to God.

There is a sense that to be spiritual means to be an introvert, to be someone who just loves to sit and do nothing alone. I had a colleague who used to needle me and say, “When are you going to do something on spirituality for shallow extroverts?”

A big challenge for us is to find practices for people who are extroverts, for people who are kinesthetic or visual or musical or all those multiple intelligences that the Christian educators are learning about these days. Now there are people who are taken with the practice of walking a labyrinth. This appeals to folks who may not find it fruitful to sit in a quiet room all by themselves and not think about anything for twenty minutes.

How do you deal with spiritual practices from other origins?

MARK GREINER

The tradition, both the biblical tradition and the larger theological tradition are a gift,
a ground to stand on with other spiritual disciplines. I don’t find myself immediately suspicious of other spiritual disciplines, but I would want to ask what the grounding is, and what’s missing. Frequently what I find is that the prophetic biblical tradition is lacking. Many contemporary American spiritualities are highly individualistic. The orientation towards justice may get left out. Most helpful in thinking about this has been Dorothee Söelle’s book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*.

I’ve been participating in something called “Zen Christian Spirit” at a Jesuit retreat center. Spiritualities other than Christian spiritualities are a part of my practice. The Zen teacher, a Jesuit priest, said at the last gathering that this is not a retreat, it’s an advance—I really like that sensibility.

I’m not in the camp of saying that whatever works for you spiritually is fine. I think that the rigors of theology, of grappling with both the positive and negative of the tradition, does offer some very important touchstones.

**IMAM UMER ESMAIL**

One person did come to me with a question. He had a friend from work who went to yoga classes, and asked him to join him for a class. So he joined him for one session and saw that a lot of the postures they practice seemed Islamic: the bowing down, then standing, then bowing down. He told me that it was a good experience for him, and he was able to relate the benefits to why Islam asked us to prostrate, because you feel that spiritual closeness to God. So something like yoga would not be controversial for me. But wearing the cross or actively participating in worship and prayers or something like that, I wouldn’t allow.

**KRIS HAIG**

I think the spirit in which you do something, and the meaning you attach to it are crucial. So that it’s possible to take a practice from outside of the Christian realm or outside of the Presbyterian realm and get engaged in it as a Christian and understand it as Christ-centered for us. I think of walking the labyrinth. That didn’t originate as a Christian practice. And yet it was appropriated by the Christian church in the Middle Ages, and interpreted in light of the church and Jesus Christ and the center of it became union with Christ. I’m not as concerned about what other people call borrowing from other traditions, so long as we then incorporate it into our own tradition and really think about what it means in terms of our belief and our tradition.

Every desire, if you follow it down deep enough, will come to something that’s a holy yearning. I think there’s an absolute human need for ritual. We need to engage all of our body, and not just our left brain, that is, our rational, cognitive apparatus. People are hungry for that. And I think that holy yearning is present because we are incarnate people. God is an incarnational God. And we know, deep, deep down that we want to live in this integrated way of body, mind, spirit, soul, and heart—all of that together.
**LIFE’S WORTH: THE CASE AGAINST ASSISTED SUICIDE, Arthur J. Dyck.**
*Reviewed by Ismael García, professor of ethics, Austin Seminary.*

Do terminally ill patients have the moral right to petition their physicians to assist them to die? Should physicians have the freedom and legal right to comply with such requests? These are the dominant concerns that Arthur Dyck addresses in his book.

The author presents an accessible, comprehensive, and clearly written argument against physician assisted suicide (PAS), showing that there are sound reasons to support the moral and legal prohibitions against it.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, using the case of Dr. Timothy Quill and the Quill v. Vacco Supreme Court case, describes the context and conditions from which it may seem reasonable and even compassionate for a physician to assist a patient in killing herself. Dyck looks at the issue from two perspectives, that of the patient making the request and that of a physician who is supportive and willing to grant the request. He develops his line of reasoning by presenting the different philosophical, moral, and experiential findings used by those who want to justify PAS and those who, like himself, want to hold on to the traditional professional practice of limiting health care services to providing comfort only care (COC). He examines the writings of various key philosophers, ethicists, and theologians that have taken a stance for or against assisted suicide. The manner in which he analyzes this debate enables the reader to understand better how our moral options are influenced and affected by the beliefs and convictions of physicians, acceptable medical practices, social conventions, and by the system of law.

The second chapter develops further the central moral differences between PAS and COC. It clarifies what is morally at stake between the practice of allowing a terminally ill patient to die by means of intentionally withdrawing life support systems after it is determined that there are no prospects that any further medical intervention will be to the patient’s benefit, and the alternative practice of intentionally expediting the dying process through assisted suicide.

In the third chapter Dyck presents his understanding of the natural moral structure that supports our commitment to preserve and protect life. He develops the moral and legal implications of its three basic principles: the natural inalienable right to life, the love of life, and the sanctity of life. All of these principles nurture our natural proclivity to sustain life and the prohibition against killing. This moral structure has been an integral part of our system of law and of the founding documents of the nation. PAS is dangerous precisely because it undermines our basic proclivities and also the restraints that make it prohibitive for us to kill. It is dangerous because it erodes both the inclinations and prohibitions that are part of our shared humanity, and that also define the responsibilities and rights necessary to sustain our individual and communal life.

In his final chapter, Dyck reexamines the three constitutive principles of the moral structure: the natural inalienable right to life, the love of life, and the sanctity of life, from a Christian point of view. He relies heavily on John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Roman Catholic Church teachings to argue for the affinity that exists between his secular philosophical view of the natural moral structure and the biblical and theological traditions that inform Christian moral commitments. On this basis, he calls upon all Christians to reclaim their public voices and assume their civic responsibility in promoting social policies that sustain our shared common morality.

This text presents a compelling moral...
and political argument for not legalizing PAS. It claims persuasively that such a decision is not just a matter of privacy and personal conviction, but one that has implications for the kind of society we become, including our attitudes toward protecting life. Attention to these additional concerns would have made the book stronger. One is the issue of legitimate moral exceptions: can there be cases where one may justify the act of assisting a person to die while still opposing PAS becoming a routine practice? The second issue, which he does not consider, is how the absence of a national health plan that is both universal and comprehensive impacts the way we think about PAS. If we uplift moral obligations that terminally ill patients have to sustain the moral structure that defines life as having unconditional worth and value, then we also need to provide the social and economic support that empowers them to do so. In the absence of a health coverage that is both universal and comprehensive, we seem to be demanding that terminally ill patients be heroic in their last days and not just morally virtuous.

Many of us will be called to participate in end of life decisions, both personally and professionally. We might be called upon to counsel friends, family, and loved ones, and even to engage in the public debate regarding PAS. This text enriches understanding of the various legal, moral, and religious issues at stake in these decisions.

**GILGAMESH: A NEW ENGLISH VERSION,**

Every year or so, I re-read the Gilgamesh Epic. I got into this rhythm after coming across a comment by Elias Canetti, a Nobel Prize winning author, who said something to the effect that Gilgamesh was the most important text in the world. Certainly it is one of the most important.

Until coming across Canetti’s comment I had not read *Gilgamesh* since a student in seminary. I read it first because I was required to read it. I read it after hearing Canetti’s remark because he said it was such an important book (and because I sensed that it deserved to be read in a different frame of mind than the one I possessed as a student who simply read a text in order to master its information for an exam). Now I have come to read *Gilgamesh* again and again because it has become important to me at a more intimate and personal level.

A character in “Shadowlands,” a film about C. S. Lewis, says, “We read to remember we are not alone.” This encapsulates why *Gilgamesh* has become important to me. Reading this ancient cycle of stories (The epic is something in the neighborhood of 4000 years old), I stand beside human beings striving to make sense of the essential elements of life and death, the sacred and the forbidden, divine will and human compulsions, the quest for transcendent meaning, and ways to cope with the dangers that surround us. Gilgamesh, the king, and his friend, Enkidu, become contemporaries. Their strangeness reinforces their humanity. I recognize in them, indeed, a humanity we share. I feel with them the elation and dread of our existence.

At the climax of the tale, Gilgamesh witnesses the death of his friend, and he grieves: “If my grief is violent enough, perhaps he will come back to life again.” Gilgamesh vents the power of grief, and he expresses a fear of death immediately recognizable to anyone who has ever suffered profound sorrow.

I was frightened,
I was terrified by death,
and I set out to roam the wilderness.
I cannot bear what happened to my friend

I cannot bear what happened to Enkidu

so I roam the wilderness in my grief.
How can my mind have any rest?
My beloved friend has turned into clay—
my beloved Enkidu has turned into clay.
And won’t I too lie down in the dirt like him, and never rise again?

Gilgamesh’s grief and fear, and the questions attendant to both, drive him to seek the secret of eternal life.

Must I die too? Must I be as lifeless as Enkidu? How can I bear this sorrow that gnaws at my belly, this fear of death that restlessly drives me onward? If only I could find the one man whom the gods made immortal

I would ask him how to overcome death.

So Gilgamesh seeks Utnapishtim, a man given the gift of immortality for saving a remnant of the world from the Great Flood. As a seminary student I read these passages to discover the textual antecedents to the biblical story of Noah. Now I read them to hear the echoes of human voices down millennia-long corridors, trying to catch on sibilant whispers the struggles of the oldest recorded spiritual seeker.

This is why each year I read *Gilgamesh* again. There are many good critical editions in which to read it. Stephanie Dalley’s translation in the Oxford University Press World Classics series, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (1989) and Andrew George’s translation, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (Penguin, 1999) are two especially strong, and accessible, critical editions. Until recently, Herbert Mason’s *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin, 1971) did the best job of rendering the tale into serviceable, if not particularly memorable, English verse.

While Stephen Mitchell’s new English version of *Gilgamesh* does not replace the work of many other scholars including the superb critical editions of Dalley and George, it does supplant Mason’s version. Mitchell brings to *Gilgamesh* the curiosity, intellectual honesty, and reverence that made his translation of *The Book of Job* (rev. ed. 1987) so powerful, and which make his English version of the *Tao Te Ching* (1988) so lyrical. His sixty-four page introduction to *Gilgamesh* is the best lay introduction to the subject I have read, and is worth the price of the book. Mitchell’s rendering of the text, though it is not a translation (Mitchell is not a scholar of Akkadian) is a pleasure to read—and re-read.

There are some weaknesses in this English version which will drive the serious student of ancient mythologies back to the critical editions, and there are times when Mitchell’s desire to connect the ancient and the contemporary will only annoy some readers. But the wisdom and the foolishness of *Gilgamesh* have so much to teach all of us who find in the mythological king a human eye worth gazing into, and Mitchell’s version provides what is surely to be this generation’s threshold opportunity to encounter this seminal text in English.

Mitchell, in his introduction, quotes a Sufi master: “This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it.” So we seek, and so we are found.

**Other recommended books**

**EAT THIS BOOK: A CONVERSATION IN THE ART OF SPIRITUAL READING, Eugene H. Peterson.** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Author of the provocative Bible translation, *The Message*, Peterson’s essays and lectures on the timely subject of the “spiritual” readings of Scripture offer practical guidance for the imaginative first-hand encounter with the biblical text. **Recommended by John Alsup, The First Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, D. Thomason Professor of New Testament Studies.**

**THE PASTOR: A SPIRITUALITY, Gordon W. Lathrop,** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). This Lutheran (ELCA) pastor and retired seminary professor of liturgy writes about the spirituality of pastors’ lives as they repeatedly encounter the central pastoral-liturgical tasks of worship. **Recommended by Jennifer Lord, associate professor of homiletics.**

**NO GOD BUT GOD: THE ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND FUTURE OF ISLAM, Reza Aslan.** (New York: Random House, 2006.) This is a great introduction to Islam, relating its origins and history to contemporary issues—very readable, but erudite. **Recommended by Whit Bodman, assistant professor of comparative religion.**
Christian faith entails more than mere affiliation with Christ; it involves a profound transformation of character in which certain qualities are prominent. Christian faith cannot long flourish in a life filled with hatred, impatience, or impulsivity, but instead invites us to practices and perspectives that bear spiritual fruit. Yet, despite our desire for such transformation and renewal of our character, we also exist ambiguously within social systems that form in us sensibilities contrary to Christian faith. For example, contemporary American life requires that we buy and consume products; in this context we unwittingly form habits of character, ways of perceiving

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and responding to others and our world. If we desire to bear the Spirit’s fruit, it is worth inquiring whether habits formed in our consumer context are consistent with the Spirit’s fruit.

Good Christians disagree about whether a consumer economy best serves the world’s needs. Some argue that globalization and its requisite high level of consumption greatly benefits the poor, since buying stimulates the economy, encourages investment, and creates jobs. Others maintain that globalization and consumption fundamentally contradict Christian social teaching—since overheated economic growth intensifies the exploitation of natural resources and produces prodigious amounts of waste, while disproportionately benefiting the wealthy. The contemporary church must answer the question of the economic system of consumer capitalism and whether it is necessary, helpful, inevitable, unsustainable, or contradictory to Christian faith. Yet within these arguments lies another question central to the lives of individual Christians: What kind of character is constituted amidst consumer habits?

Recently, many theologians and scholars have observed the impact of consumer habits upon the quality of our character. Some conclude that despite what our economy does for people, it also does terrible things to people, even to those who succeed. It makes them into people that they should not and do not want to be, while also encouraging them to do things that they should not and do not want to do. This essay explores three particular ways in which consumer culture degrades the quality of character fostered in Christian faith.

**Abstraction**

We are awash in consumer-oriented devices that purport to make life more convenient. However, such convenience comes at a great price. Richard Gaillardetz argues that although we gain convenience from commodities, we lose benefits internal to practices they replace. For example, he suggests that technological devices, such as central heating, abstract us from practices which require practical knowledge of the world and development of our own capacities while also building social capital among friends and strangers. For example, heating by wood involves knowing something about the surrounding land, which wood burns best, and how to chop wood and efficiently light a fireplace, which has often been a locus for social gatherings and cultivating relationships.

Technological commodities not only relegate us to passive roles and ignorance about our world; they also leave the Holy unacknowledged. Technology tends to remove the friction from our lives and with it the possibility that God may be found in the midst of relationships that form in a less technologically centered setting. Gaillardetz states, “We need … a new ‘mystagogy’ in which humankind is guided to a more profound recognition of the presence of God as Holy Mystery emerging from the warp and woof of … the very commonness of everyday things.” Gaillardetz is not advocating nostalgic retreat to primitive conditions, but is urging discernment concerning which practices engage or distract us from life’s richness in the presence of God. Apart from such discernment, consumption—especially of technological devices—risks
forming character marked by disconnection, apathy, a lack of intellectual curiosity, and unresponsiveness to life's blessings and wounds.

**EROSION OF TRUST**

Not only do convenient commodities abstract us from the world and God, but also, as sociologist Barry Schwartz argues, the new consumerism involves loss of trust in others—particularly those merchants upon whom we increasingly rely for nearly every material necessity. The enormous diversity of consumer goods and the complexity of new commodities prompted by fresh technology and intense competition between producers make it difficult for consumers to be informed. *Caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware—has always been the rule of the marketplace; but nowadays, being wary mostly results in buyers feeling all the time that they have probably been taken. Economists argue that trust is not needed for a fair market because competition will drive dishonest merchants out of business. But in the new consumerism people cannot know enough about products or merchants to gauge who is dishonest and make informed choices. Now, more than ever before, people must rely on trust; and now, perhaps more than ever, such trust is unwarranted. Drawing on over fifteen years of research by sociologist Paul Blumberg documenting abuses in the marketplace, Schwartz states:

> The chances are pretty good that in the course of an ordinary day [an average person] has been cheated or exploited about a dozen times ... that he had work done on his car that wasn't necessary, that the meat in his sandwich was long past its prime, that the premium scotch he asked for was actually a cheap substitute, that the “fresh” fish was frozen ... that there were actually 96 pills in the 100 pill prescription he paid for, that the sale prices that were hand written on the tickets in the department store were actually the original retail prices while the prices printed on the tickets were 20 percent higher than the store had ever charged.4

Schwartz argues that, “The pursuit and exploitation of individual advantage in the service of profit is built into the ideology of the market. Those who fail to capitalize on their advantages will earn less money, or be fired by their bosses, or be driven out of business by their competitors.” Even professionals, once virtuously committed to service in medicine, law, and politics, now often exploit their credentials against clients for profit. As a result, cynicism has become a strong undercurrent in our society—since “everyone is out for themselves.”

The habitual mistrust fostered in consumer culture is contrary to our Christian hope to love God and neighbor. Although economists debate the necessity of trust (we don't need it if we are well informed consumers), Christian faith requires of us a “hermeneutic of generosity” toward others—especially strangers. Parker Palmer notes that in the biblical tradition, the “stranger” often reveals a word from God. As strangers spoke to Abram and Sarai concerning their blessed destiny, we, too, are instructed to view other people as bearing a message that opens us to God, neighbors, and our best selves. Palmer argues that each of us harbors broken or “strange” parts within ourselves.
that cannot be revealed without opening ourselves to the difficult or contrary word from the stranger. When we open ourselves to God and others in trust we also find ourselves open to love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

**Invidious Comparison**

A third threat to Christian character involves our reliance on commodities and comparison with others to give our lives meaning, prompting a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction, spending, and inattentiveness to God’s presence amidst ordinary life. Millions of Americans perceive possessions as projecting meaningful statements about the kind of people they are, including their values, tastes, and status. This does not necessarily mean that we are a nation of crass status-seekers or base materialists. Instead, we are individuals who are continually comparing our own lifestyles to those of a select group of people we respect and want to be like. Juliet B. Schor insists that while competitive acquisition has long been an American institution, in recent decades the culture of spending has intensified. The new consumerism is built on relentless ratcheting up of standards. She states,

> In the old days, our neighbors set the standard for what we had to have. They may have earned a little more, or a little less, but their incomes and ours were in the same ballpark … Today a person is more likely to be making comparisons with a reference group whose incomes are three, four, or five times his or her own. The result is that millions of us have become participants in a national culture of upscale spending.

> In addition to friends and co-workers, we now compare our lifestyles to our media “friends.” Schor observes, “When twenty-somethings can’t afford much more than a utilitarian studio but think they should have a New York apartment to match the ones they see on ‘Friends,’ they are setting unattainable goals for themselves, with dissatisfaction as a predictable result.” Consumers respond to this dissatisfaction by buying on credit, abusing company expense accounts, shoplifting, or other less than wise or honest responses.

This private overspending has also had a boomerang effect on public spending, including education, social services, public safety, recreation, and art. Ironically, this has only added to the pressure to spend more on consumer goods: as public resources deteriorate, families send children to expensive private schools, buy security systems, and spend time at malls instead of parks.

While humans are naturally social creatures inclined to compare ourselves to those around us, contemporary consumerism has created an unnatural protean existence in which we are hyper-attuned to those around us. Like chameleons we change commodity skins to keep pace with the mercurial shifts of the market and the whims of our friends. Style has become the new substance. Yet we cannot but wonder what lies beneath this seduction to commodities, whether such an overemphasis on surface and style betrays a core devoid of character, or a desperate search for meaning and purpose. Despite our ideological commitments to Christian faith, our cultural priorities reveal a
not-so-subtle idolatrous relationship with commodities, and a covetous relationship with what our neighbors have. Sadly, these priorities determine our response to those around us: as repeated by Christian sociologist, Tony Campolo, “The greatest heresy of our time is that we love things and use people.” Alternately, Christian faith conceives of humanity not as endlessly flitting from one style or commodity to the next, but with a center of gravity formed in response to God that gives weight and character to our relationships with other people and things.

CONCLUSIONS

In the American context, consumerism does not simply describe an incidental economic principle, but is instead a force that shapes our very character. Consumerism involves a tacit worldview that influences how we respond to others; the sensibilities formed in consumer culture threaten the very quality of Christian life. Such a threat requires that churches become learning communities which learn to perceive distortions of Christian faith and to think creatively about their call to respond to such issues. “Abstraction,” “erosion of trust,” and “invidious comparison” does not exhaustively describe the threat constituted by consumerism, nor the possibilities for God to speak even amid these threats. Fuller discernment involves church members gathering to tell the stories of their lives, reflecting together on their alienation and the call of God upon their lives. We must create a variety of forums to help us cultivate Christian virtues. Such forums may include Sunday school classes to educate members about the dangers of consumerism; covenant groups to help members honestly assess their attachments to consumer goods and to support and hold each other accountable for commitments to resist them; family practices to engender alternative values by teaching and modeling for children how to live simply and respectfully of others; and church groups to imagine and create alternatives to consumerism, such as growing a community garden or creating our own musical and dramatic events. Finally, we must acknowledge that consumerism constitutes a nearly totalizing system and that resisting its forces requires uncommon courage. But also, and perhaps most subversive, we must enhance our capacity to bear each other graciously as we struggle together against these forces on behalf of the greater possibilities for Christian faith. We may find love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control more possible within the contexts of these alternate practices.

NOTES

5. Schwartz, 41.
Interview
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You stopped everything and prayed three times a day?
It wasn’t quite that dramatic. I organized my life so that after I got dressed in the morning, and then right before or right after lunch, and then right before I went to bed, I would stop and do Bible reading and pray. Getting back in the habit of prayer helped me remember my spiritual life as a child, by the way, when my parents modeled spirituality for me.

What do you mean?
I mean that my mother taught me to pray. When I was a little kid, my mother would pray with me before I went to bed and my father said grace at every meal. Both of them were doing priestly functions in the family. I suspect that a lot of families now don’t even know that’s an option. It’s not that they choose not to do it, it’s just that they don’t know it can be done.

What does Jesus have to do with any of this?
If Christian spirituality is about your relationship with God, there isn’t any way around Jesus. You form a relationship with God by knowing about Jesus. That’s the point where God’s concern, love, care, and direction for you is concrete and manifest. In leading a life that is modeled after Christ’s life, you become conformed to the pattern of a particular life. Your relationship with God is not amorphous. It has the shape of the One who was one with God and one with us. There is, of course, a certain specificity to that shape, because you are you, and you live where and how you live, and you face the particular questions you face. But ultimately, What would Jesus do? is not a trivial question for any of us. There’s a sense in which your life is something like a sacrament. So God’s love goes through you to other people. And that is what it means, I think, to lead a Christian life.

If there’s one thing you would tell our readers about spirituality, what would it be?
Two things: The first is to repeat what St. Augustine wrote: Love and do what you will. The second is this: It’ll be okay. The church will be here, Jesus will not be forgotten, there will be faith on the earth of some kind when the Son of Man returns. As someone once said: your problem is that you’re trying to hold the rock up. Instead, let the rock hold you up.
Theodore J. Wardlaw, President

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