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A CHURCH FOR ALL SEASONS:
A GENERATIVE AND COMMUNAL SPIRITUALITY
ACROSS SEASONS OF FAITH

Written by

DAVID KLUDT

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

_____
Dr. Chuck DeGroat
Content Reader

_____
Dr. Kurt Fredrickson
Associate Dean for Professional Doctoral Programs

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A CHURCH FOR ALL SEASONS:
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A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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DAVID KLUDT
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ABSTRACT

A Church for All Seasons:
A Generative and Communal Spirituality
Across Seasons of Faith
David Kludt
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
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The Dark Night of the Soul, a poetic phrase arising from the writings of St. John of the Cross, is a common but misunderstood part of the Christian journey. It is often a lonely season where a wider Christian community has greater difficulty connecting and supporting a person's journey with God through deconstruction, loneliness, and doubt. Yet it is a necessary season in the human journey toward God and a season that brings a dynamic richness and deep wisdom to the wider community of faith.

Particularly in evangelical contexts that thrive on stories of conversion and celebration, seasons of sorrow, doubt, and loneliness are often distanced from the centrality of the church's shared life together. Yet while these seasons of deconstruction and dark nights are often lonely, they need not be isolating. This project maps out a communal and generative vision of spirituality that is robust and dynamic enough to encompass all seasons of faith.

Part One of this project explores the theology, reality, and necessity of seasons of faith where God feels distant, communal life feels complex, and faith feels difficult. Part Two surveys resources for a generative and communal approach to spirituality across seasons of faith and the contextual realities facing emerging generations and the church in the ever-changing world. Part Three demonstrates how specific postures and practices of faith can create a generative environment for Christian formation across seasons of faith.

Content Reader: Chuck DeGroat, PhD

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For all who have held and continue to hold space for me
to experience my own seasons of faith
and for all those who entrust me to hold similar space for them

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the growing list of friends, teachers, and mentors who
demonstrate what it means to live a faithful life.

To my family, thank you for your patience, generosity,
and commitment always held tight with love.

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PART ONE

DARK NIGHTS AND DECONSTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION

As a college student at the University of Wisconsin, I, nearly simultaneously, rediscovered the faith I had jettisoned in early adolescence and began a process of deconstructing that faith. The rediscovery was refreshing and exciting; I found a community of faith that held both a vibrant depth of intellectual rigor and room for doubt and questions. As I served and led within this community, I began to actively discern a call into vocational ministry.

The deconstruction was as exhausting as the rediscovery was life-giving. I began asking complicated and critically-difficult questions without clear direction or guidance on either the appropriateness or answerability of my questions. While I would regularly show up for Sunday worship, I was frequently found not in the chairs or pews with others, but sitting alone along the back wall of the sanctuary writing furiously (in both pace and emotion) in my journal. Alongside a community expressing joy, adoration, and worshipful attentiveness, I was working through frustrations, hypocrisies, and questions. Though I was never chastised for my strange presence in worship, neither was there clarity offered about what I might do with the questions raging within me.

My time in seminary would later give me language for some of these philosophical and theological questions – theodicy, hermeneutical spirals, postmodern shifts, and so on. The more personal and soulful questions were wrapped into the language of the soul's dark night and the disruption of my faith's initial naiveté, concepts which resonated deeply with me in this season filled with complicated questions. The cerebral and intellectual puzzles were being addressed through a process of

deconstruction – which often felt more like a series of unintentional, unexpected explosions than a systematic and careful work of my own. Despite a desire for a deepening journey of faith, I was experiencing a disconnect between how the language of my formative faith tradition spoke of God's presence and my own changing experience of God.

Though there was not a clarity around the questions I asked, I was thankfully accompanied by patient guides who named, encouraged, and supported what they sensed was a call into vocational work with the church (whether this was despite or because of my questioning, I am not sure). I persisted in navigating my complicated questions, at times finding my faith anchored in the faith of supportive peers and mentors when my own faith in God felt untenable. Now, nearly two decades since I began college, I cannot help but wonder whether my faith would have withstood seasons of doubt and confusion without the clarity that came with what I discerned as a vocational calling. I continued to wrestle with my doubts and questions as if my job depended on it (because with my career plans at the time, it did).

Many people navigating seasons like this do not have a patient, supportive, and discerning community around them, and many do not have a sense of vocational responsibility to sit in the painful and disorienting questions. For these people, I wonder how their journey and mine differ. Though I had the gift of supportive accompaniment through college, I also know the sense of othering and disapproval often underlying the response to the person with too many questions (or too many of the wrong questions). I know many who felt there was little to no room for them and their shifting expressions of faith in the traditions and communities of their early faith formation. Loneliness,

isolation, and eventually departure from those traditions and faith communities is not uncommon.

If my own journey – marked by doubt, questions, and a perceived waning and waxing of God's proximity – was not anomalous but, in some ways at least, an inherent and normative part of the human journey toward God, then faith communities should be places where the full complexity and diversity of a faith journey is supported, welcomed, and celebrated, yet the opposite is often true. While exploring faith is encouraged, dwelling on unresolved tensions, paradoxes, and disconnects can be seen as divisive and problematic. Textbooks filled with wordy doctrine and systematic proofs of faith were often given in response to my sustained doubt. Testimonies and stories highlighted in worship spaces are filled with optimism, celebration, and professions of faith while mid-journey stories of wandering and loneliness are kept in the shadows. So many experience a church that chases new conversions and celebrates positive affirmations of faith while diminishing and distancing those wrestling with deep questions and profound complexities.

Personal Leadership in Context

This project not only arises from my personal journey of faith but from the contexts where my ministry leadership has taken shape. My first job in ministry was directing a church-based college ministry that, in part because of the shape of my own faith at the time, welcomed doubters, seekers, and explorers and eagerly gave space for questions without what I experienced as the evangelical urgency to provide answers. Rather than a group of questioners seeking answers, we gathered as a group who, largely,

had inherited answers to questions we had not asked, and now had the freedom and space to ask the questions provoked by those answers.

After the rediscovery and deconstruction of my late adolescent faith and attempts at a systematic reconstruction of faith during my seminary training (where everything was, eventually, supposed to work out, at least on paper), I spent the last twelve years in pastoral leadership in two ministry contexts. The two congregations I have pastored— primarily made up of emerging adults in the millennial demographic cohort— have curated similar environments of spiritual exploration. (This project, and specifically Chapter 3, will explore the faith and cultural trends of the millennial generation as a window into the rapidly-changing world the church is now situated in.)

Both congregations I have served have been small and experimental church communities. Each has committed to forming followers of Jesus whose lives reflect the vibrancy and hope-pointing character and practice of a good news that can be tangibly experienced as good in our world. With my own commitment to leading with transparency and authenticity as much as possible, my own pastoral presence has always involved my own story of a faith both forged by and susceptible to doubt, questions, uncertainty, and change.

My current ministry context is a Christian faith community called Open Door in the East Bay outside of San Francisco. Made up mostly of millennials, many have experienced and navigated a deconstruction of their early faith frameworks, often in response to or in dialogue with shifting intellectual, political, or social beliefs. As a community open to and, in many ways, shaped by our disagreements and disbeliefs, multiple individuals have expressed that were it not for the space our community

provides for the disorientation of their faith, they are not sure there would be another Christian community where they could fit.

Whether true or just a perception, this idea that Open Door is the last chance people will give organized faith both troubles me and gives me hope. It is troubling because of the gravity I feel as a pastor of this community; it is hopeful because I increasingly believe in the expression of church characterized by the Gospel of Matthew's description of the community following Jesus where they "worshipped but some doubted" (Mt 28:17).[1] If the community of disciples physically present with Jesus could include both worshippers and doubters, perhaps faith communities today can do the same.

Cultural Shifts and the Church Emerging in the West

From the Enlightenment through the Industrial Revolution and continuing with the current technological revolution, the church (globally, but particularly the church in the West) has been confronted by a rapidly and tumultuously changing world.[2] With the sudden rise of industry and technology, much of the world has globalized, with increased access and exposure to a diversity of culture, experience, and thought never before accessible or known on this scale. Add to that a rampant individualism and spirit of autonomy, and it is unsurprising that today's church is struggling to keep up.[3]

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from the Common English Bible.

[2] Global/cultural shifts are explored further in Chapter 3.

[3] While attendance and numbers are not sufficient metrics to measure the health of the church, the frequently reported decline in membership and attendance across most denominations is striking and unsubtly suggestive of a massive change in cultural responses to religion and spirituality.

One critical cultural shift pertinent to this project is the bifurcation of spirituality and religion. While these words may once have been inextricably linked or even synonymous, the last half-century has seen the popular emergence of a spiritual life separate from shared, collective religious experiences. The phrase "spiritual but not religious" (first used in a Yale anthropology publication to describe a semi-syncretist Jamaican spiritual movement[4]) has come to describe a growing number of Americans who embrace a spiritual framework outside traditional religious structure; a 2017 Pew research poll noted 27 percent of Americans self-identify as not religious but spiritual, with this number on the rise while the number of Americans who identify as both religious and spiritual declines.[5] This phenomenon seems particularly evident in the shifting trends of the hyper-individualized spiritual lives of the millennial generation.

As part of a research group at Harvard Divinity School studying millennial spirituality (now a separate entity known as the Sacred Design Lab[6]), Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile published *How We Gather*. This report explores implications of a major sociological trend among millennials: that they hold on to spiritual beliefs and practices while being "less religiously affiliated than ever before."[7] Their research calls this shift "less a process of secularization and more like a paradigmatic shift from an institutional

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[4] Donald Hogg, "The Convince Cult in Jamaica," in *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 58 (1960), 9.

[5] Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual but Not Religious," *Pew Research Center*, September 6, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/.

[6] Sacred Design Lab, accessed November 4, 2019, https://sacred.design.

[7] Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, "How We Gather," accessed November 4, 2019, https://sacred.design/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/How_We_Gather_Digital_4.11.17.pdf.

to a personal understanding of spirituality."[8] Rather than a rejection of the sacred, millennials are reframing their experience of faith and spirituality in light of cultural upheaval and unprecedented global shifts.

While not celebrating this shift away from traditional religious expressions, Thurston and ter Kuile do levy critique against approaches of traditional churches (calling them "one of many institutional casualties in the internet age"), particularly in their mishandling of human souls, writing that "the hierarchies of religious institutions too often have led to abuse, and theologies of inadequacy have led to a culture of shame."[9] Rather than seeking specific answers to specific questions within particular institutions, millennial faith is marked by an exploration of the world looking for meaning, impact, and significance with less concern for finding these things in traditional places.[10]

While these trends undoubtedly challenge traditional structures of religious institutions, they also provide great opportunity to widen the scope of learning and the purview for spiritual explorers to seek truth and meaning. In the Christian tradition, this can be seen in what Phyllis Tickle called "the great emergence:"[11] a critical overlapping of disparate traditions and streams within Christianity providing spaces for shared knowledge and blended pathways. In many ways, this cultural moment where spirituality

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[8] Thurston and ter Kuile, "How We Gather."

[9] Angie Thurston, Casper ter Kuile, and Sue Philips, "Care of Souls," accessed November 5, 2019, https://sacred.design/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CareofSouls.pdf.

[10] Chapter 3 explores this phenomenon of "unbundling" in relationship to the millennial generation's experience of faith deconstruction ("Care of Souls").

[11] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 2012.

is shifting and the world is witnessing a synergetic emergence of traditions and streams provides opportunity and hope.

Framework of this Project

St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic, poetically captured the potential for complexity and pain in the human journey toward God with the phrase "the dark night of the soul." Chapter 1 explores the concepts of the dark night of the soul and seasons of deconstruction as indicators of a healthy and natural spiritual journey. The chapter considers a vision for Christian spirituality that integrates these often-lonely seasons into the spaces of a faithful worshipping community.

Chapter 2 reviews essential literature and resources providing a theoretical framework for the project. The chapter begins with reviewing the philosophical and theological frameworks of James McClendon, who develops an understanding of life's theological richness and the essential role of practices within an ecclesial community of care, and Alasdair MacIntyre, who ties ethics (practices) and community (shared life) to a sense of life's cohesive unity. Ken Wilber and James Fowler each contribute to a theory of movement within the human faith journey; Janet Hagberg provides a practical framework for walking through Wilber and Fowler's broader frameworks. Christine Valters Paintner, Thomas Merton, and Benjamin Chavis, Jr. provide three examples of trajectories toward generative faith in complex seasons of faith.

Chapter 3 will explore several cultural shifts critical to the focus of this project. From the major globalizing movement rooted in the Enlightenment and Industrial and Technological Revolutions to the shifting sociological realities of the millennial generation and those following, the space that religious organizations and faith traditions

inhabit in the world has changed dramatically. This chapter explores the implication of those shifts and trends for the human experience of God and the journey of faith.

Chapter 4 considers how a church can hold space for and faithfully form people across faith seasons. Building off of the classical three ways of Illumination, Purgation, and Union, the chapter provides a rough map to the Christian spiritual journey and specific postures that allow for a generative and communal spirituality across seasons of faith. Chapter 5 outlines a theology of spiritual practice and experiment that intentionally incorporates a spectrum of faith seasons and envisions how specific shared practices (silence, story, sabbath, and eucharist) can be engaged across faith seasons for the purpose of furthering a generative and communal spirituality.

A Word on this Project's Privileged and Limited Scope and Focus

A final note is necessary about what lies within and outside of the scope of this project. While I have attempted to expand beyond my own journey as an individual human and an individual pastor, there are innumerable limitations obviously and thankfully preventing me from writing prescriptively across culture and time. I continue to recognize the ways my privilege (rooted in gender, ethnicity, family of origin, etc.) has, in many ways, granted me unique and spacious opportunities to explore and deconstruct my own journey of faith (much less faith as a wider human phenomenon).

This project, then, enters into conversation with a wider, diverse exploration of faith communities' ability to hold space for the full complexity of the human experience. While it is also my hope that this project makes contributions to that conversation, there is an ever-continuing need to listen to the stories being told beyond this project's purview

and scope. My personal and pastoral experiences with the church have been largely in the American evangelical stream of Christianity, so throughout, references to the church and the faith experiences of Christians largely reflect that purview rather than the broader context of the global church. Throughout the preparation, research, and writing of this project, I have dialogued with a core group of thought partners whose life narrative is vastly different from my own. They have shared their own journeys with faith, church communities, and their experience of deconstruction and faith's dark night. These stories have taught me much about both the limitations and importance of this project. It is my hope that this project joins a growing collection of work tapping into a diversity of stories in order to resource the messiness, complexity, and beauty of the fullness of a faith journey across disparate stages and seasons.

CHAPTER 1

THE JOURNEY OF FAITH AND SEASONS OF
DISTANCE, COMPLEXITY, AND DIFFICULTY

St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic and poet, captured the complexity

possible in the human journey toward God when he wrote of "the dark night of the

soul."[1] This chapter explores the role of journey or movement in the life of faith, and

specifically considers the concepts of the dark night of the soul and seasons of

deconstruction as normal and natural experiences on a healthy and human spiritual

journey. While these seasons are often marked by loneliness and isolation, the chapter

considers a vision for Christian spirituality that integrates these seasons into the spaces of

a faithful and formative worshipping community.

It was early in the history of the church that the human journey toward God was

conceptualized with distinct stages or approaches. In the third century, St. Clement of

Alexandria and Origen appropriated a bifurcated model of the active life and the

contemplative life from Platonic thought, with the invitation to consider how a life of

faith both involved work in the surrounding world as well as an inward-facing

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[1] See St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image, 2005).

contemplative journey.[2] The sixth-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius offer a three-stage framework, sometimes known simply as the three ways.[3] The framework of the three ways, used by many after Pseudo-Dionysius—Purgation, Illumination, and Union—denote the necessary ways the spiritual journey clarifies or empties (purgation), inspires or compels (illumination), and ultimately moves a human toward a state of *theosis* or comingling with the divine (union).

While these are early attempts at framing the spiritual life, the concept of a journey toward God involving seasons or stages is present throughout the Scriptures. The patriarch narratives of the Pentateuch depict a literal journey from familiar places to places of encounter and disruption, and into places of unknown: "leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you" (Gn 12:1). The Exodus journey from Egypt to the land promised is frequently referenced as a staging ground for further faith and mission (Ex 13; Lv 19:36; Dt 4:20); while the Exodus is a journey literally depicted, it is referenced as a metaphor conveying God's intentions for Israel to live not "in the house of slavery" (Dt 5:6) but as "[the Lord's] own treasured people" (Dt 4:20). The wisdom tradition speaks of "a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens" (Eccl 3:1).

Jesus uses the language of beginning life again—being "born anew" (Jn 3:3)—and "becoming like [a] little child" (Mt 18:3) to enter God's kingdom, the spacious realm of God's intentions and existence. Paul instructs the church at Corinth toward the

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[2] Ernest E. Larkin, "The Three Spiritual Ways," accessed November 5, 2019, http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin092.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

opposite; rather than becoming like kids again, he urges them to mature to the point where they can be nourished by "solid food" rather than the "milk" he gave them because they "weren't up to it yet" (1 Cor 3:1-3). While there is a common thread of metaphors in the Scriptures speaking to the movement, growth, and journey of life with God, there is no central or sole image or framework for the journey.

More recent and popular attempts to categorize or frame the shifting aspects of the journey include Richard Rohr's work on the two halves of life in *Falling Upward*,[4] Brian McLaren's "twelve simple words,"[5] Dallas Willard's "curriculum for Christlikeness,"[6] Mark Scandrette's "ninefold path" of the Beatitudes,[7] and Anne Lamott's three movements of "help, thanks, and wow."[8] Individual churches have developed their own processes or approaches to growth (e.g. Saddleback Church's "baseball diamond" or Life Development Process[9]), though these are often designed primarily to anchor and commit individuals in a local ministry context rather than fuel an open-ended spiritual journey. While not mutually exclusive, these two do not always go hand in hand, and the static imagination for faith in many contexts might inhibit or limit one's journey of faith.

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[4] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

[5] Brian McLaren, *Naked Spirituality* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

[6] See Chapter 9 in Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

[7] See, for example, Mark Scandrette's *9 Beats Project*, https://9beats.org/ninefold-path/.

[8] Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

[9] See Chapter 8 of Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

Surveying the field, the number of stages seems unimportant. The naming of seasons seems unimportant. What seems critical is the recognition and resourcing of a faith that shifts and matures and grows over the course of time. Faith is not static but a dynamic phenomenon. The movement toward God is a journey of conversions and conversations rather than a singular prayer catalyzing a singular conversion event.

What also seems true is that the church—at least many contemporary expressions of Western Evangelical Protestantism—has better resourced and celebrated earlier stages of faith formation than the later. The remainder of this chapter focuses on two seasons or experiences often falling in later stages of faith, the dark nights of the soul and experiences of deconstruction. For most Christians outside of mystical traditions (and particularly for Protestant evangelical expressions of faith), these two seasons are less frequently spoken of, celebrated, and resourced. Yet they each are part of a human's journey of faith.

The Dark Night of the Soul and the Christian Faith

On a dark night, kindled in love with yearnings – oh, happy chance!
I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest

In darkness and secure, By the ladder, disguised – oh, happy chance!
In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest…

Oh, night that guided me
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn[10]

The dark night of the soul has come to popularly mean a season of pain and sadness. Psychiatrist and author Gerald May writes that people using the phrase often

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[10] St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 29-30.

simply intend to communicate "they're experiencing bad things,"[11] often a complicated

array of "bad things" all at once or over a prolonged period. The dark night can be used

alongside experiences with depression, tragic circumstances, or chronic diagnoses.

Though originating within the Christian tradition, the phrase has been used spiritually by

trans-religious teachers such as Ram Dass and Mirabai Starr[12] and artistically by many,

including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Depeche Mode, and Van Morrison.[13] While these popular

usages of the phrase can speak broadly about the human experience – whether in pain,

loss, or depression—the phrase originates from the sixteenth-century work of John of the

Cross and the discalced Carmelite movement he led alongside Teresa of Avila. It

specifically speaks to the complexity of the human experience discerning the presence

and activity of God in one's life.

In 1567, John of the Cross encountered Teresa of Avila, and they began working

together for reform in their Carmelite order; Teresa was twice John's age and her

experience and reforms encouraged John that his vision for a contemplative life could

take place within the types of community Teresa had been establishing within her

discalced (barefoot) movement.[14] Both Teresa and John felt compelled to record their

own experiences with God as an invitation and guide into a life of contemplative union

with God. When Teresa experienced vivid encounters with Christ, she "was convinced

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[11] Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 1.

[12] See Ram Dass, "St. John of the Cross and the Dark Night of the Soul," accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.ramdass.org/st-john-of-the-cross-and-dark-night-of-the-soul/. See also Mirabai Starr, "About Mirabai," accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.mirabaistarr.com.

[13] See "In Popular Culture" in Wikipedia's "Dark Night of the Soul," accessed November 25, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Night_of_the_Soul.

[14] May, *The Dark Night*, 30-31.

that her experiences were not just being given for her own edification."[15] While suffering

torture and deprivation, John felt called to create and write the poetic prayers that would

become *The Dark Night of the Soul*. For both Teresa and John, and in the twentieth

century for Mother Teresa, moments and seasons of both intimacy and pain were

opportunities to resource and direct the human longings for faith and God.

St. John of the Cross as a Guide Through the Dark Night

In the late sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross wrote extensively about the

human experience of longing for the divine. Born in Spain in 1542, St. John was educated

in Jesuit schools and despite invitations to join the Jesuit order as a teacher and

intellectual, eventually joined a Spanish Carmelite order as a friar.[16] This decision to

commit to a contemplative life over other vocational opportunities revealed John's

perspective on the human journey of faith; St. John "was convinced that understanding

and reason could do no more than point in the general direction of spiritual reality" so he

pursued and desired "direct spiritual experience" with God to guide his faith.[17]

The Dark Night of the Soul was written in connection with a larger project

describing the full experience of faith. Preceding *The Dark Night*, St. John wrote *The

Ascent of Mount Carmel* which describes "the Active Night," the seasons of faith where

"we are to deny and purify ourselves with the ordinary help of grace."[18] In these active

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[15] Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 6.

[16] T.N.R. Rogers, Introductory Note to St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, ed. T.N.R. Rogers (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003, v. and May, *The Dark Night*, 20.

[17] May, *The Dark Night*, 32.

[18] E. Allison Peers, Introduction to *The Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Image, 2005), 14.

seasons, there is much humans can do in their relationship with God; there is progress and there is response in the space between humans and God. Whereas *The Ascent* describes an active season, St. John describes the dark night as passive, where it is not the human who is tasked with work but God whose work is done to or in a person.[19] It is this passive season that St. John describes as a "more obscure and dark and terrible purgation."[20]

As a written work, *The Dark Night of the Soul* is comprised of a short, eight-stanza poem followed by a longer, prosaic commentary on each line. It is traditionally thought that much of *The Dark Night* was written while St. John was imprisoned and tortured by members of his own Carmelite order because of his work as a reformer challenging the status quo of his religious order. In the midst of his own experience of literal pain and suffering, St. John's intention in writing *The Dark Night* was to provide illumination or a guide for seasons of faith of which "very little has been said…, either in speech or in writing, and very little is known of it, even by experience."[21] Through St. John's writing, the human journey toward God is illuminated, even in the midst of seasons of disorientation.

For John, the dark night affects both the sensory and the spiritual, which he describes as "the two parts of [human] nature."[22] He suggests that many will experience "the night of sense," where the common spiritual expectations developed in the early

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[19] Ibid.

[20] St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, quoted in Ibid., 13.

[21] St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 63.

[22] Ibid., 62.

stages of faith are overturned when "God…shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever and for as long as they desired."[23] Fewer, though, experience "the night of spirit," where the consolations of God can fall away completely and a person is led by God into the "solitary places of the wilderness."[24]

In other writings, St. John develops an apophatic framework to describe the elusive nature of God; sketching a path up a mountain, St. John names a series of possible spaces where one might experience God, but names each of these things *nada* ("not this, not that").[25] In something of a paradox, while St. John writes that *nada* is found in the places humans often search for God, Kieran Kavanaugh suggests that, for St. John, "there is no end to the variety of shadings, the ways in which truth may be illuminated for individuals."[26] God can be found nowhere and God can be found everywhere; the soul's night and the search for God is elusive, complicated, and a journey.

St. John's work connects with the framework of the faith journey mentioned earlier in the Introduction (the three ways of purgation, illumination, and union). Rather than a quick, simple, or straightforward act of conversion bringing an immediate experience of God's presence (as often portrayed in American evangelicalism and revivalism), the historic Christian perspective of faith was long, complicated, and

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[23] Ibid., 63.

[24] Ibid., 65-67.

[25] May, *The Dark Night*, 57 and see the sketch of St. John's mountain path in Kieran Kavanaugh, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2017), 111.

[26] Kavanaugh, *The Collected Works*, 106.

winding. The purgation, or emptying, was tangible and painful but necessary in order to bring a human into union with God.

While the dark night is the common translation from St. John's most famous writing, in Spanish, the work is entitled *Noche obscura del alma*.[27] Gerald May notes the intention of *obscura* is not simply the absence of light or a more figurative presence of something devious or malevolent, but the more literal possibility of *noche obscura* being a night obscured; "in the same way that things are difficult to see at night, the deepest relationship between God and person is hidden from our conscious awareness."[28] Teresa similarly writes that "it's very important for us, friends, not to think of the soul as dark. Since we cannot see the soul, it appears to be obscure."[29] In the same way that a "camera obscura" has been used for centuries by astronomers to view something otherwise unviewable (like an eclipse or the movements of the sun),[30] so the *noche obscura* can reveal that which is otherwise unperceivable for the human journeying toward God.

St. Teresa as a Guide Through the Dark Night

Born in 1515 in Spain, Teresa was faced with several cultural marginalizations: as an outspoken female in a patriarchal culture, as someone who faced serious and chronic illness, and as a member of a family that converted to Christianity from their Jewish heritage. In light of that family heritage and the impending threats of the Spanish

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[27] Rogers, Introductory Note to *The Dark Night*, vi.

[28] Gerald May, *The Dark Night*, 67.

[29] Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead, 2003), 261.

[30] "Camera Obscura," Griffith Observatory, accessed November 23, 2019, http://www.griffithobservatory.org/exhibits/halloftheeye_cameraobscura.html.

inquisitors, her grandfather chose to make a public conversion of Christian faith. Though there is no evidence the family's confession was suspect, Mirabai Starr suggests many of these public declarations of conversion were made for self-protection while private religious practices and beliefs did not shift, resulting in the suspect term *conversas* being applied.[31] While Teresa's parents and grandparents pursued "status and prestige" in order to overcome this marginalized social position, Teresa, it seems, turned to a contemplative devotion and faith.[32]

Despite (or possibly because of) early bouts of illness and the loss of loved ones, including her mother, along with an aversion to potential marriage arrangements, Teresa was motivated toward a passionate pursuit of the contemplative life and "dedicated herself to the cultivation of interior silence."[33] In part due to dissatisfaction with what she perceived as a lax commitment to her order's spiritual life, Teresa pursued reforms within the Carmelite order, pushing for a purer experience of the contemplative life in order to "renew the Order's commitment to contemplation, simplicity, and community."[34]

Later in life, when Teresa was in her sixties, she was encouraged by a superior in her order to record her vision for the spiritual life.[35] Teresa depicted the human journey toward God as a journey inward, as "the soul is like a castle…, [and] in this castle are a multitude of dwellings."[36] She describes a journey filled with hurdles and obstacles yet

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[31] Mirabai Starr, Introduction to *The Interior Castle* (New York: Riverhead, 2003), 4.

[32] Ibid., 5.

[33] Ibid., 9.

[34] *Discalced Carmelite Friars*, accessed November 22, 2019, https://discalcedcarmel.org.

[35] Starr, Introduction to *The Interior Castle*, 19-20.

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moving inward toward a "fountainhead that shines like the sun from the center of the soul [that] never loses its radiance."[37] Of this center, or state of union, Teresa writes the soul experiences "everything [as] new…an incredible clarity…a luminous cloud…a wondrous kind of knowledge…[a] sublime knowing."[38] While throughout Teresa's writings the center of the castle is bright, illuminating, and almost seductively compelling, the journey inward is not simple.

Teresa maps seven mansions or dwellings to be traversed as one moves toward the center, each filled with its own challenges and obstacles to overcome. Teresa's imagery describes these obstacles in varying ways, from "reptiles" and "nasty creatures"[39] to repetitive tasks like transporting water "from far away, carried through many aqueducts requiring much ingenuity"[40] to traversing a "[vivid] interior spiritual pain"[41] and "the feeling of having been torn asunder."[42] Teresa is honest about the difficulty of this inward journey, writing that "you cannot avoid being bitten at some point."[43] It is both the pain of the exterior life (reptiles, venomous creatures) and the draw of the light within that compel the inward journey.

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[36] Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 35.

[37] Ibid., 42.

[38] Ibid., 263-264.

[39] Ibid., 39-40.

[40] Ibid., 97.

[41] Ibid., 253.

[42] Ibid., 250.

[43] Ibid., 50.

Chuck DeGroat maps the journey through these dwellings as seven pathways or developmental stages in the journey toward God, naming them "curiosity, commitment, control, crisis, conversion, cruciformity, and communion."[44] Each of these pathways, containing unique hurdles and obstacles, represent an opportunity for the growth and transformation necessary for the inward journey toward wholeness. Like St. John's *Dark Night*, Teresa's *The Interior Castle* points with a poetic vividness to the painful but necessary journey humans take as they journey toward God.

Mother Teresa as a Modern Guide to the Dark Night

In her personal correspondence and private writings, Mother Teresa,[45] the twentieth-century humanitarian and saint, provides a modern example of what St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila experienced centuries prior. In an early correspondence with a priest from her hometown of Skopje, Macedonia, she writes "do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses –that is the flower which I hardly ever find on my way. Quite the contrary, I have more often as my companion darkness."[46]

Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor of Mother Teresa's private writings and director of the Mother Teresa Center, explains that, for Mother Teresa, "the term [darkness] would come to signify profound interior suffering, lack of sensible consolation, spiritual dryness, an

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[44] Chuck DeGroat, "St. Teresa of Avila," SP752: Deepening Spiritual Formation & Soul Care (class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, November 5, 2019).

[45] Throughout, Teresa of Calcutta will be referred to as such or as Mother Teresa and Teresa of Avila will be referred to as such or as Teresa.

[46] Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 20.

apparent absence of God from her life, and, at the same time, a painful longing for him."[47]

Mother Teresa's experience of the dark night was vivid and pronounced. She writes "this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. – Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. – The place of God in my soul is blank.- There is no God in me…He does not want me- He is not there...My very life seems so contradictory."[48] Though later she would write "the greater the pain and darker the darkness the sweeter will be my smile at God."[49] The tension in Mother Teresa's writing, recounted in *Come Be My* Light, parallels the human journey described by John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila; the human journey of faith can withstand both brutal loneliness and the excruciating questions accompanying that loneliness.

The overlapping Catholic mysticism of these three can result in a language barrier for readers outside this tradition. For many Christians outside of monastic communities or clerical celibacy, the language of expectant intimacy (such as Mother Teresa "committing herself to Jesus in spousal love"[50]) may feel foreign or strange. The emphasis on the miraculous or mystically supernatural can create a discomfort or distance for those whose experience or originating tradition of God is more cerebral. Nevertheless, the wider Christian community (and the God-curious outside of the Christian tradition),

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[47] Ibid., 21-22.

[48] Ibid., 210. The dashes and punctuation are from the original quotation.

[49] Ibid., 222.

[50] Ibid., 23.

despite differing experiences, can learn much from these explorations of the dark night and complexities of faith.

While the intimate language used by John, Teresa, and Mother Teresa may be off-putting to some, the publication of *Come Be My Light* and the revelation of Mother Teresa's extended period of dark night provided a space of connection between Mother Teresa, a literal saint, and the human whose journey of faith may be marked by similar experiences, longings, and pain. James Martin, writes that "[Mother Teresa's] letters show how, when confronted with a complex spiritual crisis, she questioned with candor, vigor and passion, and ultimately responded with trust, love and works of charity. She is revealed as a complicated and sophisticated seeker."[51] Carol Zaleski, writing for First Things, describes Mother Teresa as "converting her feeling of abandonment by God into an act of abandonment to God."[52] Teresa of Calcutta's own journey is an embodied invitation to see the complexities of faith not as a dead end but as an opportunity for continued growth and exploration.

<center>The Dark Night as Gift</center>

Gerald May speaks of the dark night as something given rather than something figured out; "It is an ongoing spiritual process in which we are liberated from attachments and compulsions and empowered to live and love more freely."[53] The darkness of the

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[51] James Martin, "In My Soul: The Long Dark Night of Mother Teresa," in *America: The Jesuit Review*, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2007/09/24/my-soul-long-dark-night-mother-teresa.

[52] Carol Zaleski, "The Dark Night of Mother Teresa," in *First Things*, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/05/the-dark-night-of-mother-teresa.

[53] May, *The Dark Night*, 5.

night, according to May, is not about threat or danger or anything "sinister, only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding;"[54] the experience of the dark night is "profoundly sacred and precious beyond all imagining."[55] Both the painfulness and the preciousness of the dark night of the soul are seen clearly in the writings and lives of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Mother Teresa.

Deconstruction and the Christian Faith Experience

While connected to and often interwoven with the framework of the dark night of the soul, deconstruction is a separate (though often parallel) process. Whereas the dark night may signify a deeply personal shift in the human experience and encounter with the divine, deconstruction as a term is often used to describe a more proactive dismantling or disorientation to the faith frameworks inherited in the early stages of one's faith. If the dark night of the soul is a poetic, soulful exploration of the ever-deepening complexity of the divine, deconstruction is the prosaic, intellectual counterpart to that journey.

Like the dark night, the term deconstruction has been popularized and applied beyond the scope of its initial and early application, and both the initial and popularized concepts are helpful. Writing in the 1960s, Jacques Derrida coined the term to describe a process of ascertaining reality beyond the mere appearance or surface of a thing. For Derrida, deconstruction was a helpful (and necessary) exercise for any "kind of thinking that never finds itself at the end," or an area of thought without clear or universally agreed upon conclusions; justice, power, meaning, and authority were all early in the

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[54] Ibid., 5.

[55] Ibid., 67.

scope of deconstruction.[56] As Derrida's work disseminated, deconstruction expanded across fields of study, including to Christian theology, at an academic and philosophical as well as a popular level.

The term and its associations often sound negative or combative. Kevin Vanhoozer describes deconstruction as "a strategy for taking apart or undoing."[57] James K.A. Smith writes that deconstruction "opens a space of questioning—a space to call into question the received and dominant interpretations that often claim not to be interpretations at all."[58] Deconstruction, then, is often thought of as a destructive task, yet it can also guide toward constructive and positive discernment. John Caputo writes that "deconstruction is affirmation—affirmation of memory and the future, of the past and of what is coming, and of how to be on the move."[59] Deconstruction can be the process by which an individual sheds faulty reasoning or interpretations-veiled-as-truth in order to ascertain a deeper and more resonant experience of truth and reality.

A common starting point to deconstruction is often any theological framework involving violence (atonement, eternal destiny, the Canaanite conquest, etc.). In an early book by Brian McLaren, he reflects on facing the question "Why did Jesus have to die?" from a congregant.[60] While there are commonly-offered answers (often found in songs or

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[56] "Jacques Derrida," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed November 25, 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/.

[57] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1998), 20.

[58] James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 51.

[59] John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 46.

[60] Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 80.

lessons designed for children) to this question when raised in stages of early faith formation, the question resurfaces for many in later faith formation, especially in light of a growing social-psycho and cultural awareness of trauma, violence, and power dynamics.

While previous generations may have answered such questions through an engagement in intellectual apologetics, expanded cultural awareness can push these questions beyond a cerebral exercise and into a deeper and more troubling psychological space. The same answers and the same methods for finding answers may no longer satisfy many, and deeper explorations and prolonged seasons of doubt and intellectual questioning are increasingly normal. Thus, while the dark night of the soul and the process of deconstruction are distinct experiences of faith, these two seasons often overlap, adding psychological complexity to the already challenging intellectual questions raised by the pursuit of faith in today's world.

The institutions of Christianity do not often have spaces where such prolonged seasons are welcomed or allowed. Catholic theologian Hans Küng was famously reprimanded for teachings straying from the Church's positions, specifically on papal infallibility; in his words, "I had personal experience of the Inquisition…[yet] remained unswervingly faithful to my church in critical loyalty."[61] Peter Enns has written publicly about how his shifting theological positions resulted in his eventual ousting from Westminster Theological Seminary.[62] While the academic environment presents its own

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[61] Hans Küng, *The Catholic Church: A Short History* (New York: Random House, 2003), xviii.

[62] See Trevin Wax, "The Peter Enns Controversy," accessed November 26, 2019, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-peter-enns-controversy/.

unique challenges and regulations (tenure, academic freedom, statements of belief, etc.), this lack of space for shifting beliefs and intellectual exploration certainly extends to the local church where it is more commonly expected that pastors provide answers rather than provoke questions.

If this is true in the intellectual centers of Christianity, and if it is true in the local expressions of the church, it does not seem a stretch to assume it is true of individuals engaged in the exploration of faith.[63] A common thread through these stories is the exiting or leaving an institutional space, whether a seminary, a church, or other local community. Christena Cleveland writes, "as I continue down my path of laboriously excavating and grieving the lies that the spiritual community of my origins has told me about the Divine, I find myself letting go of much of the doctrine, practices, and relationships that I've relied on to stabilize my spiritual identity and supply me with answers to life's toughest questions."[64] The process of deconstruction requires a flexibility not often found in the rigidity of Christian faith communities.

Can These Seasons Be Avoided?

Janet Hagberg writes about the intellectual process of deconstruction when encountering what she and Robert Guelich termed "the Wall" in their framing of the faith journey's stages: "we deal with the Wall by drilling holes in it and attempting to weaken it enough to topple it. Paradoxically, we are drilling holes in our own perspectives too.

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[63] For some recent and popular examples of individuals shifting or exiting faith, see Mike McHargue, *Finding God in the Waves* (New York: Convergent, 2016) or Brandon Vedder's documentary about David Bazan, *Strange Negotiations*, directed by Brandon Vedder, Aspiration Entertainment, 2019.

[64] Christena Cleveland, October 16, 2019, accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B3szqSPF7-E/.

Sooner or later our doctrines or knowledge will fail us."[65] Hagberg continues: "the

process of meeting the Wall requires going through the Wall, not underneath it, over it

around it, or blasting it. We must go through it brick by brick, feeling and healing each

element of our wills as we surrender to God's will."[66]

Gerald May writes "early in life it is often possible to shut out these momentary

dissatisfactions as soon as they appear."[67] It grows more difficult over time, he argues, to

continue avoiding the longings and questions that for many exist beneath the surface.

Perhaps it is less that these seasons can be avoided as much as they can be ignored and

the potential transformation of these seasons missed. But what seems most true is that

they cannot be bypassed.

Envisioning a Generative Christian Spirituality Integrating Dark Nights and Deconstruction

Many local churches focus their resources on a particular stage of faith (either by

intentional choice or a passive default). That focus then defines success and achievement

in that context (for example, adult conversions measured by baptism, childhood faith

formation measured by the number of kids catechized or confirmed, or global missions

measured by budgets and service hours). In evangelicalism, it is often the early stages of

faith that receive the most prominent attention; in a personal conversation with a friend

who works at a large, well-known evangelical church, he said "[our church] knows it is a

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[65] Janet O. Hagberg and Robert E. Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 2005), 118.

[66] Ibid., 119.

[67] May, *The Dark Night*, 64.

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need but does nothing to resource late faith formation." The early stage is a season of new life, new birth, and reason for celebration because "joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life" (Lk 15:10). Such a heavenly celebration seems a worthy reason to focus earthly attention on facilitating similar stories of repentance.

Yet the church is not simply called to a ministry of evangelism and conversion. To the Corinthian church, Paul speaks about the life of faith as a race, inviting them to "run to win," (1 Cor 9:24), or to run to completion. A similar sentiment in Hebrews invites the people of God to "run the race that is laid out in front of us" (Heb 12:1). Modern evangelicalism's attention on securing confidence on one's eternal status can pedestal initial conversion and deemphasize the ongoing transformation taking place in a human life on the journey of faith. Gerald May writes of God's "protective guidance through all human experience – the good as well as the bad,"[68] and it is to a similarly holistic work that the church is called.

In Clive Barker's fantasy novel *The Thief of Always,* the protagonist is a curious, bored, and disenchanted boy who is longing deeply for meaning and purpose. His boredom leads him to be entrapped by a sinister gift-giver in a place where he is given all he needs or wants except the ability to grow or change. Ultimately, the only way out of this captivity is to demand the gift-giver give him "all the seasons at once."[69] The paradox renders the gift-giver powerless and the protagonist is freed.

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[68] May, *The Dark Night*, 12.

[69] Clive Barker, *The Thief of Always* (New York: Harper, 1992), 191.

The consideration of this project is whether it is possible to create a space of communal spirituality and faith formation that resources "all the seasons at once." The hope and trust is that this paradox will not render the church powerless but instead resource holistic faith formation in such a way that all humans across stages and seasons of life can flourish. As Teresa of Avila wrote: "remember, this castle has many dwellings: some above, some below, others to either side."[70]

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[70] Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, 36-37.

PART TWO

FRAMING A COMMUNAL
SPIRITUALITY FOR ALL SEASONS

CHAPTER 2

FRAMEWORKS AND RESOURCES

Whereas the previous chapter explored what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night" and the experience of deconstruction in a Christian faith context, Chapter 2 surveys resources that map a way toward a communal and collective embrace and understanding of the complexity of the human experience of faith, providing a theoretical framework for this project. The chapter begins by reviewing several philosophical and theological frameworks of James McClendon, who develops an understanding of life's theological richness and the essential role of practices within an ecclesial community of care, and Alasdair MacIntyre, who ties ethics (practices) and community (shared life) to a sense of life's cohesive unity. Ken Wilber and James Fowler each contribute to a theory of movement within the human faith journey; Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich provide a practical framework for walking through Wilber and Fowler's broader frameworks. Finally, Valters Paintner, Merton, and Chavis, Jr. provide three examples of trajectories toward generative faith in seasons of dark nights and deconstruction.

Frameworks for Constructive & Communal Spirituality

The selected works begin with a pair of philosophical academic frameworks navigating the place of the individual in a wider collective story. James McClendon's *Biography as Theology* frames the experiences that make up an individual's life—the joys and celebrations and the pain and disappointments—as a coherent and rich source of theological insight. Selections from Alasdair MacIntyre provide a philosophical invitation to recognize the way humans are shaped collectively by narrative in such a way that all parts and pieces of a life, no matter how disparate, can fit together in a coherent whole.

James McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life's Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*

James McClendon, professor and theologian in the (ana)baptist tradition,[1] offered *Biography as Theology* in support of his larger project exploring theological ethics and the role of character in the community of God's people. *Biography as Theology* argues that a life well-lived can "successfully '[incarnate]' …authentic Christian faith,"[2] and therefore offers a unique theological insight into the work of God in the world. The Christian life (the life of one inspired by or transformed by Christ) can offer a source for theological thinking about Christ and God's work in the world.

Writing from the perspective of the "changed landscape of our time," McClendon argues that an ethic based on character and community must take the place of the utility-

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[1] Though McClendon taught within Anabaptist frameworks and in conversation with Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and John Howard Yoder, he personally referred to and framed his work as a baptist vision, described by Spencer Boersma as "the typological practice of all free-church communities who see their convictions centered in the Bible, liberty, community, discipleship, and mission." See Spencer Boersma (2017), "The baptist Vision" Doctor of Theology thesis. Wycliffe College, 2017.

[2] James McClendon, *Biography as Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1990), viii.

driven, secular vision of life.[3] McClendon moves the ethical gravity from "deliberate choices" to choices "in which [one] acted unknowingly."[4] For McClendon, the source of ethics—the determinant of how well a life was lived—cannot be derived from individual instances, perhaps highlighted autobiographically by the individual themselves, but instead by the life as a whole, moments of specific intention as well as the moments of cultivated instinct. A life, therefore, should be examined as a whole rather than in parts: seasons of clarity as well as confusion, faith along with doubt.

McClendon encouraged "self-scrutiny….in order to discover what God has been doing in [one's] midst."[5] Scrutiny may be perceived as an unnecessarily harsh and challenging word, though the more common modern invitation to self-reflection may not be strong enough to describe the loving but somewhat excruciating task of sufficiently considering the state of our life (personally and collectively) and asking how God is at work in it. The task of discerning theology within one's biography invites and demands an uncommon level of rigor in mining one's own story or the story of another.

Though *Biography as Theology* invites "self-scrutiny," the work is less focused on an individual than the title may suggest. McClendon writes, "The best way to understand theology is to see it…as the investigation of the convictions of a convictional community."[6] McClendon, therefore, links the ethics of an individual's character to the convictions of one's community, and therefore an individual's experience in life cannot

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[3] Ibid., 1.

[4] Ibid., 6.

[5] Ibid., x.

[6] McClendon, 20.

be separated from the web of relationships surrounding them and the divine threads at work through their life and their community. Each and every life, and every season of life, as well as the communities encapsulating each life, can be mined for the unique work of God.

McClendon writes that "by being the persons we are, we are able to do what we do, and conversely, by those very deeds we form or re-form our own characters."[7] The choices we make matter and the way we navigate those choices matter. By extension, if individual lives are shaped by the communities those lives exist in, the choices a community makes matter and the way communities navigate those choices matter. If community is a primary means by which the character and conviction of the individual is formed, then communities must hold the journeys taken by the individuals comprising that community with care.

Biography as Theology provides insight into the seasons of deconstruction and dark nights that Chapter 1 argues (along with the work of James Fowler outlined below) are a natural and often necessary part of the human journey of faith. The manner in which McClendon explores character ethics raises the bar for how an individual navigates their decision-making as well as for how a community navigates the decision-making of individuals who are part of the community. McClendon's rejection of an ethic based on instance-based decisionism and subsequent argument for a more holistic ethic based on character suggests, for instance, that an individual's decision to follow Christ must be read (biographically) in the wider context of their journey of faith. If that

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[7] Ibid., 16.

individual makes a later decision to leave or shift their understanding of faith, both the initial and latter decision are sourced from within the community that produced such decisions.

Neither a decision to enter into or shift a journey of faith can be read in a vacuum but is instead woven together into the integrated story read as a person's life. Our convictions and our decisions are not isolated, standing on their own. McClendon says these "do not exist in hermetic isolation from one another."[8] As an individual navigates the stages and seasons present in a faith journey, there is a theological thread tying together the decisions to say both yes and no to faith.

Surveying the global realities at the time of writing, McClendon speaks of the "national moral harvest" of the prevalent understanding of ethics: "the betrayals, burglaries, lies, bribes, subornations, [and] hypocrisies."[9] It is not difficult to imagine a similar contemporary harvest resulting from a refusal to invest in the serious work of ethics and character of which McClendon writes. This harvest can be seen in the socio-political sphere (from the obfuscation of truth to the USA's inability to acknowledge and reconcile its racist past) as well as in religious spheres (from massive scandals in both Catholic and Protestant streams of Christianity to the rapid decline of membership in most denominations and the un-Christlike judgmental rigidity so commonly attributed to Christianity, at least in America). The continually-rising rates of those leaving the church begs the question of whether a different moral approach (such as McClendon's

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[8] Ibid., 21.

[9] Ibid., 13-14.

character ethics driven by a holistic narrative framework) may create spaces of faithful flourishing relying not on rigidity but on the recognition of one's biography, the peaks and valleys, shadows and lights, as a trustworthy source of knowledge and revelation.

Though *Biography as Theology* is primarily concerned with the individual biography sourced from a space of collective community, a collective extrapolation is also present. A community's character, just like the individual's, is "both the cause and the consequence" of what it does.[10] As churches make decisions to welcome or excommunicate, or to resource or avoid resourcing particular seasons of faith, those actions tell the story of what was and also what will (likely) continue to be; a shared story of belonging (despite difference) or a rigid exclusion are reinforced in the shared narrative of the community and the individual narrative of a person being shaped by the community.

McClendon clarifies that by biography as theology it is not autobiography that he speaks of;[11] it is not one's own telling of one's own story, but the story that is told and seen by the life one lives. Whereas autobiography "runs the risk of extreme self-deception,"[12] biography allows a more neutral and unfiltered observation. The reader or interpreter of each storied life, then, is the community surrounding that life. Each story, each life, and each community will, by the movement McClendon suggests, carry unique theological insights and perspectives. No stories, no lives, and no seasons of life are void of the sacred and divine.

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[10] Ibid., 16.

[11] Ibid., vi.

[12] Ibid.

Biography as Theology argues for the role of conviction in both a community and individual ("integral to character and the existence of community"[13]), yet McClendon does not write about the resulting shifts when convictions change. He does acknowledge that "if [convictions] were surrendered, the person or community would be significantly changed."[14] Perhaps more so than ever before, humans are exposed to an increasing numbers of communities with conviction. The character (and communities) developed by conviction may be strong enough to weather any fickleness of human convictions and give space for an ebb and flow of conviction in different seasons of life, even while holding to McClendon's argument that shifted convictions will inevitably (eventually) result in shifting character. The question which this project explores (and on which McClendon does not offer clarity) is whether a community, rather than simply the individual, can sustain some of the weight, responsibility, fear, and stress accompanying a major shift in conviction.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* and Selected Writings

Alasdair MacIntyre is a moral and political philosopher whose most recent appointments were at the University of Notre Dame and Duke University. MacIntyre's work is technical and broad-reaching but informs this project specifically at the intersection of MacIntyre's work on narrative, life unity, and the frameworks of tradition and community. Because of the density and scope of MacIntyre's work, this section only

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[13] Ibid., 19.

[14] Ibid.

briefly surveys themes of MacIntyre's work from *After Virtue*, one of MacIntyre's seminal works, and other selected writings expounding on themes found in *After Virtue*.

The basis for MacIntyre's ethical framework is communal rather than individualistic. MacIntyre writes, "I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"[15] He continues: "we enter human society…with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed."[16] In order to understand where one stands (or what one currently believes or disbelieves), one must understand the people and communities that have shaped them (and, more than simply understand those people and communities, perhaps maintain lines of communication and formation with those people and places). This framework suggests an inextricable link between an individual's formation and the formative communities of which they have been a part, inviting deeper reflection in the midst of a highly-mobile, individualist-driven world.

In the article "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," MacIntyre uses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a case study instancing a human's family history and current social location being "disrupted by radical interpretative doubts;" MacIntyre says Hamlet's task is "to reconstitute, to rewrite that narrative, reversing his understanding of past events in the light of present responses to his

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[15] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 250.

[16] Ibid.

probing."[17] This seems an apt parallel for a modern journey of deconstruction, where a traditionally held belief or set of beliefs may be subjected to "radical interpretative doubts," giving rise to a crisis of both narrative and community.

MacIntyre's solution to Hamlet's (and the human's) crisis is the "construction of a new [enlarged] narrative, which enables the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them."[18] This invitation to re-narrate a larger story can provide cohesion to what was previously experienced as dissonance or a rupture. Part of this expanded narrative may require a communal framework with enough fluidity to hold multiple narratives in the process of working themselves out, including brittle collections of original beliefs and those expanded through crises and critique. Practically and pertinent to this project's scope, faith in the midst of deconstruction requires an expanded narrative, large enough to hold both the initial experience of faith as well as later seasons of disillusionment, dark nights, and deconstruction.

The potential for the narrative unity of a life is a central concern for MacIntyre. "The unity of a human life," writes MacIntyre, "is the unity of a narrative quest" and these quests "sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions."[19] Part of the quest is, no matter if the prevailing experience is painful, disorienting, or disruptive (or deconstructive), reconciling and finding unity between the individual and

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[17] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Monist* 60:4 (October 1977): 455.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Alasdair MacIntyre, "After Virtue (Extracts)," in Kelvin Knight, *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1998), 90.

the individual's relationship with community. He writes that "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships."[20] While MacIntyre is not making an argument to never sever a damaging or painful relationship either with an individual or a community, he invites recognition that to make a sharp break from a formative community of one's past can be a deforming act, requiring reconstructive and reconciling work to uphold the narrative unity of the journey or quest of one's life.

MacIntyre suggests that the contemporary world is such that the disagreements and dissonances we experience are "peculiarly unsettlable."[21] In particular, he references debates about human life, violence and war, and macro-economics. MacIntyre's concerns also extend to faith communities and religious traditions; theologian Brad Kallenberg writes that MacIntyre "bemoans the absence of moral communities in the modern world."[22] Were MacIntyre to offer a constructive invitation for Christian faith communities, it may be to create the kind of resourced space necessary to uphold an individual in the work of reconciling the quest of their life narrative, with all its complexity and dissonance.

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[20] Ibid., 92.

[21] Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Claims of *After Virtue*," in Kelvin Knight, *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1998), 69.

[22] Brad Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," *Religious Studies Faculty Publications* (2011): http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub/66, 46. While MacIntyre would not equate "moral communities" with "churches," faith community and religious traditions would fall under this broader category.

Stages and Spirals of Faith

The second section of this chapter explores the psycho-spiritual frameworks of faith stages and the integral/spiral dynamics theory of human-cultural development. Ken Wilber's *Integral Spirituality* provides an anchor in experimental and theoretical work around human development at a socio-cultural and global level. James Fowler's seminal work in *Stages of Faith* and Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich's *The Critical Journey* both introduce and explore the unique process of an individual's human development in the journey of faith.

Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*

Ken Wilber is an experimental and seminal thought leader who teaches and writes about the shifting, growing, and evolving human consciousness. His writing weaves disparate varieties of source materials into what he has termed a "theory of everything: a model that would unite all the known laws of the universe into one all-embracing theory that would literally explain everything in existence."[23] Wilber's writing is ambitious, complicated, cerebral, and at times can feel far-fetched and nonsensical. Yet, the driving intent of his work—to see disparate things held together and to trust in a narrative large enough to hold all the pieces of the universe—is critical to the shaping of communities of faith that create space for tension, dissonance, and difference. Specifically helpful to this project are Wilber's work around spiral dynamics, healthy growth, and nested truths.

Spiral Dynamics is a development model Wilber has popularized in his writing and teaching. Originally envisioned in the mid-twentieth century by psychology professor

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[23] Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), x.

Clare Graves, the Graves model (as Spiral Dynamics is sometimes called) maps human development onto an ever-increasing number of tiers or stages (sometimes called memes) based on driving values, approaches to and resources used for problem solving, and the purview and vision of what one is able to see.[24] Don Beck suggests that spiral dynamics is the answer to the question of how systems can be structured "that handle the complexity of our interconnectedness while allowing people to grow and move naturally through the stages of human development."[25] Of particular importance is Spiral Dynamics' usefulness in helping humans past roadblocks when points of view or previously-shared understandings no longer align, when our "interconnectedness" clashes with "[natural]…stages of human development," as Beck says.[26]

Wilber subdivides the Spiral Dynamics memes or stages of development into the categories of preconventional (egocentric), conventional (ethnocentric), and postconventional (worldcentric).[27] Wilber suggests that the "postconventional stages…are marked by an intense scrutiny of the myths, conformist values, and ethnocentric biases that almost always inhabit the preconventional and conventional stages."[28] Without suggesting a direct parallel between deconstruction and later stages of human development, deconstruction could be characterized by a similar post-

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[24] Antonia Dodge, "Personality Tools: The Graves Model," accessed November 26, 2019, https://personalityhacker.com/personality-tools-graves-model/.

[25] Don Beck, "Preface," in *Spiral Dynamics in Action*, ed. Don Beck, et al (London: Wiley and Sons, 2018), xvii.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Wilber, *Theory of Everything*, 21.

[28] Ibid.

conventional, "intense scrutiny" toward the myths, values, and biases of an earlier or inherited faith tradition.

A critical component of Wilber's work for an understanding of the faith journey is the invitation to "transcend and include;" Wilber writes that "each wave goes beyond (or transcends) its predecessor, and yet it includes or embraces it in its own makeup."[29] Wilber writes that "development is not a linear ladder but a fluid and flowing affair, with spirals, swirls, streams, and waves and what appear to be an almost infinite number of multiple modalities."[30] This image of development as patterned, circular, and spiraling is helpful, as it insists on a gratitude and humility as one shifts and grows; whatever comes next will build from what comes before. Wilber writes of human development as "a spiral of compassion, expanding from me, to us, to all of us: there standing open to an integral embrace."[31] Wilber's understanding of human development parallels the invitation of St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila into divine communion. While early moments in the journey of faith can foreshadow the depth and promise of union with God, the formation which occurs through difficult seasons like dark nights and deconstruction can forge deeper trust, resilience, and awareness of God's presence and the possibility of divine union; even if one emerges from a complicated season in familiar territory (or a familiar community of faith), the spirals and patterns of the journey deepen and change even the most familiar of landscapes.

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[29] Ibid., 11.

[30] Ibid., 5.

[31] Ibid., 22.

Another key aspect of Wilber's writing is the potential for truth to be "nested" within layers or stages of development. Wilber writes, "It is not that there is *one* level of reality, and those other views are all…incorrect…Each of those views is a correct view of a lower yet fundamentally important level of reality, not an incorrect view of the one real level. The notion of development allows us to recognize nested truths."[32] This insight is particularly helpful for faith communities seeking to resource formation and development across multiple stages or seasons of growth. While the process of deconstruction may unpack or pull apart a particular doctrine or belief and reconstruct it differently, the deconstruction does not negate the truth "nested" in the belief prior to deconstruction, nor in the new posture toward that belief after the experience of deconstruction. Similarly, a practice or tool of faith—whether a mode of prayer or the Scriptures themselves—can be used in different ways across seasons, but the truth, inspiration, and tradition that allow them to be uniquely Christian can be "nested" across the seasons.[33]

James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*

James Fowler was a theologian, professor, and Methodist minister whose work centered on the developmental processes involved in human faith formation. Though much of his work is indebted to and in conversation with psychological frameworks, a vivid imagination for the role of faith in the human life was a driving motivation for Fowler. Faith was not, for Fowler, simply something that shifted and changed over the course of a life, or something that some people chose and others rejected.

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[32] Ibid., 111-112.

[33] This idea of nested truth in the shared practices and tools of faith across seasons will be further explored in Chapter 5.

Instead, he speaks of faith as a "life space" or "an ultimate environment" in which the contents, events, experiences, and happenings of one's life are shaped and held.[34] Fowler describes faith as "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions"[35] and as "our way of discerning and committing ourselves to centers of value and power that exert ordering force in our lives."[36] Faith, then, is not simply a religious concept but a human concept, shared across tradition and time, practice and belief.

Fowler references the work of Paul Tillich whose philosophical frameworks broadened faith beyond "a too easy identification of faith with religion or belief" toward the questions of "what values have centered power in [human] lives."[37] This reframing helpfully pushes back on the common idea that faith is something a human can lose. Rather than losing or giving up faith, Fowler's work suggests that, instead, faith is something that is ever-present in a human's existence yet shifts and changes through the course of events, seasons, and human development.

Fowler's framework for faith is communal rather than individualistic. He writes, "We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith. How these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kind of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires

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[34] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), xii.

[35] Ibid., 14.

[36] Ibid., 24-25.

[37] Ibid., 4.

community, language, ritual and nurture."[38] Speaking of faith as a composition, Fowler

says "we do not compose alone."[39] In a later work, Fowler writes that "our ways of

symbolizing the [center(s)] of transcending worth and power in our lives most often

involve symbols, stories, rituals, and beliefs that we share with others and that make us

members of communities of faith."[40] Whereas many traditions within Christianity

emphasize (and potentially overemphasize) the role of belief specifically in bringing

together a community of faith, Fowler's words are a helpful balance, recognizing the way

story, ritual, tradition, and symbol also weave together a community of faith, not just

belief.

In conversation with human developmental psychology, Fowler maps out faith

across seven stages.[41] (This project will not specifically explore each stage in depth,

instead focusing on the framework of the stages developed as a whole and how they

work.) Fowler corresponds these stages to growth from infancy to adulthood, though

Stage 3 is described as a space of "equilibrium" which Fowler suggests makes up a

majority of people connected to religious institutions.[42] Fowler's stages of faith not only

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[38] Ibid., xiii.

[39] Ibid., 30.

[40] James Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 21.

[41] In *Stages of Faith*, Fowler devotes a chapter to each of the seven stages he identifies: Stage 0 (Infancy/Undifferentiated Faith), Stage 1 (Intuitive-Projective), Stage 2 (Mythic-Literal), Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional), Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective), Stage 5 (Conjunctive), and Stage 6 (Universalizing). See Chapters 16-21 in Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

[42] Ibid., 164.

refer to personal stages but communal stages of faith that shape, encourage, and limit an individual in particular ways.[43]

Movement between stages is particularly fascinating and pertinent. Fowler asserts that "each new stage is initiated by a crisis" and "requires the reworking of…past solutions and contains in it an anticipation of the issues of crises in future stages."[44] In other words, each stage of faith is neither static nor standalone but instead intertwines and overlaps with adjacent stages, with the strengths of one stage becoming necessary when life demands movement to the next.

Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey*

Whereas Fowler's work specifically develops stages of a universal phenomenon of faith in humanity, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich specifically work within the frameworks of Christian faith (though still aware of and desiring to resource a variety of spiritual journeys, Christian or otherwise). *The Critical Journey* is the product of their working relationship and shared commitment to Christian faith formation (their own personal formation as well as others, Guelich in his role as a pastor and Hagberg as an active lay leader) at the Colonial Church in Edina, Minnesota.[45]

Indicated by the title and resonating throughout *The Critical Journey*, the metaphor of a journey is the central image of the book, noting that "whereas trip focuses

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[43] See, for example, Ibid., 161 where he uses a case study of two adolescents to demonstrate how their faith communities' faith development shaped their unique faith development.

[44] Ibid., 48.

[45] Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 2005), vii-viii.

primarily on a destination, a journey has significance when seen as a whole. Journeys are dynamic, not static. There are side trips, returns to former sites, forays into the unknown. A journey cannot be repeated, even if we try."[46]

Hagberg and Guelich outline six stages of faith: Stage 1 (Recognition of God), Stage 2 (Life of Discipleship), Stage 3 (Productive Life), Stage 4 (Journey Inward), Stage 5 (Journey Outward), and Stage 6 (Life of Love).[47] Contrasting with Fowler's stages which with track more closely and linearly with human growth and development, Hagberg and Guelich see people experiencing faith stages as "fluid, [moving] back and forth between them regularly, and [experiencing] more than one stage at the same time."[48] Similar to Fowler, Hagberg and Guelich acknowledge the human proclivity toward "[getting] stuck at a particular place in the journey because we find it more comfortable to sit than to move."[49]

The Critical Journey spends a significant amount of time on the movement between Stage 4 (Journey Inward) and Stage 5 (Journey Outward). Standing between these two stages is what Hagberg and Guelich call The Wall. "The Wall represents the place where another layer of transformation occurs and a renewed life of faith begins for those who feel called and have the courage to move into it. The Wall represents our will meeting God's will face to face."[50]

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[46] Ibid., 5.

[47] Ibid., 7.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 9.

[50] Ibid., 114.

Just as the Catholic mystical tradition speaks of a nearly-romantic state of union with God, the outcome of navigating The Wall is an "[integration] and embrace [of] our spiritual selves as well as our physical and psychological selves" and where "we encounter an endearing loving God."[51] Hagberg and Guelich speak of the deep healing, wholeness, and integration humans can experience, involving both "a transformation of the person and of [our] traditional religious images, symbols, and words."[52] Yet The Wall is also a space of confusion, pain, dissonance, potential deconstruction, and the stuff of dark nights of the soul. Parallel to St. John's dark night or Teresa of Avila's fourth dwelling, The Wall represents the strongest obstacle preventing the deepening and expanding journey of faith.

The Critical Journey highlights the deeply personal nature of the spiritual journey, particularly when encountering a season marked by The Wall or other great obstacles to overcome. Yet the authors also recognize the need for support and community as the journey is navigated. In the face of exhaustion, dark nights, and desperation, Hagberg and Guelich suggest that "relief [shows up in] the experience of others. Frequently, we also need a human guide to instruct, support, keep us on track, or just experience the wall with us."[53] This project's intent is to map out the kinds of supportive communities and relationships that can navigate and accompany others along the journey, whether at The Wall or any other stage.

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[51] Ibid., 234.

[52] Ibid., 3.

[53] Ibid., 119.

Trajectories of Generative Spirituality

The third and final section offers shorter analysis of several generative movements in spaces of dark nights or the deconstruction of one's faith. Each provides a tool or trajectory to transcend or traverse faith stages. Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a biographical map of the inward journey. Christine Valters Paintner explores the contemplative life through creativity and artistry in *The Artist's Rule*. Benjamin Chavis, Jr. exemplifies a generative approach to processing through pain and suffering in *Psalms from Prison*.

Mapping the Inward Journey: Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*

St. Augustine has been called the first spiritual autobiographer,[54] and he is certainly not the last.[55] The discipline of autobiography, and spiritual autobiography particularly, invites humans to examine their lives in such a way that allows a coherent story to be told not simply about the shape and trajectory of their life but also about the work of God in their life. Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* uses the autobiographical genre to document his own inward journey and provoke reflection on the contemplative life of faith. First published in 1948, Merton's story was offered to a world struggling to navigate global war, newly-developed and –used weapons of mass atrocity, and a profound and troubling discontent with the world's status quo.

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[54] This claim is made frequently and widely across the internet, in popular reviews of Augustine as well as academic articles.

[55] See Claire Armitstead, "The Rise and Rise of the Memoir," *The Guardian*, accessed November 29, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jan/27/biography.

Merton begins his story describing himself as a "prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born."[56] Through writing and sharing his story, in a sense Merton moves from a place of imprisonment to a place of freedom. In telling the story—the full truth of the story, regardless of where the story began or where it finished—the story not only can provide healing to the story teller, but also "no longer belongs" simply to the teller of the story but instead to the wider community listening to, learning from, and participating in a collective and shared story.[57]

While Merton's search for God and the inward journey guiding that search are central to the book, the role relationship and community played in that journey are also pivotal throughout. Though writing from the unique perspective of one who has vowed to a monastic life, Merton's work speaks of the essential role of diverse and imperfect community in the spiritual journey. Throughout, the focus on his relationships moves from his familiar relationships to diversifying circle of friends, mentors, and guides who navigate with Merton new seasons, experiences, and learnings. Near the end of *Seven Storey Mountain,* Merton writes, "the first and most elementary test of one's call to the religious life is the willingness to accept life in a community in which everybody is more or less imperfect."[58]

Merton writes in the midst of a world tearing itself apart: "All the internal contradictions of the society in which I lived were at last beginning to converge upon its

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[56] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1998), 3.

[57] Robert Giroux, Introduction to Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain*, xvii-xviii.

[58] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 419.

heart. There could not be much more of a delay in its dismembering."[59] In the midst of

that world, Merton describes the voice of God as both clear and concise ("What are you

waiting for? [the voice within me said.] "Why are you sitting here? Why do you still

hesitate?"[60]) and filled with complexity and contradiction ("How beautiful and how

terrible are the words with which God speaks to the soul of those He has called to

Himself…"[61]). Throughout, it is Merton's relationship with mentors and guides, as well

as tradition and religion, that allows him to navigate and discern the movements of this

inner voice in the midst of a world of chaos. As told in *The Seven Storey Mountain,*

Merton's inward journey would have been impossible without the support and guidance

of those who accompanied him.

Merton's work offers a critical invitation to not simply tell our own story but to

listen to another tell their story. Reflecting on *The Seven Storey Mountain* twenty years

after it was first published, Merton writes "the story no longer belongs to me…if you

listen, things will be said that are not written in this book. And this will be due not to me

but to the One who lives and speaks in both."[62] These words echo those of another

spiritual autobiographer, Frederick Buechner, when he writes "my story is important not

because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are

you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours…it is precisely through these stories

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[59] Ibid., 234.

[60] Ibid., 236.

[61] Ibid., 247.

[62] Thomas Merton's words two years prior to his death, from the introduction to a Japanese edition of *The Seven Story Mountain*, quoted in Robert Giroux, "Introduction" to Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain*, xvii-xviii.

in all their particularity…that God makes himself known to each of us more powerfully and personally."[63]

Merton described life as "mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction,"[64] and one of his editors described Merton's life as having an "innate tendency to be more ready to depart than to settle down in fixed ideas or perspectives."[65] Each life is filled with movements, shifts, and changes. The invitation of biography (auto- or otherwise) is to grow in awareness of the trajectory of one's life in order to discern and navigate those changes well.

Creativity/Artistry: Christine Valters Paintner, *The Artist's Rule*

Christine Valters Paintner self-describes as a "poet, hermit, and mystic" and a Benedictine oblate.[66] She has written extensively about creativity and contemplation, and curates the online Abbey of the Arts, "a welcoming place for deep inner work and an encounter with the great Source of both silence and creativity."[67] In *The Artist's Rule*, Valters Paintner invites readers into a contemplative and monastic spirituality expressed through and guided by art and creativity.

Valters Paintner writes that "creativity and contemplative spirituality nurture and support each other in their commitments to the slow way, to a close attention to the inner

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[63] Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (New York: Harper, 1991), 30.

[64] Quoted in John Moses, *Divine Discontent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

[65] Jonathan Montaldo, "Introduction" to Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with Silence* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), xii.

[66] Abbey of the Arts, "About Christine Valters Paintner," accessed November 26, 2019, https://abbeyofthearts.com/about/about-christine/.

[67] Ibid.

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life, and the sacred being revealed in each moment."[68] Throughout *The Artist's Rule,* readers are invited to shape contemplative practices—often using traditional Christian practices (such as *lectio divina*, a Benedictine rule*,* or meditation on the Beatitudes of Jesus)—as a starting point or framework from which to develop a unique and creative pathway to personal growth, creativity, and a deepened identity as an artist and creative. Frequently, these practices are framed less as traditional disciplines and instead as creative prompts; for example, in Week Four, Valters Paintner writes about praying the hours as "a beautiful art form"[69] and in Week One describes *lectio divina* as an "ancient practice [that] can include any sacred text—a passage that moves you, a poem you love, or an image that is calling for your attention."[70]

While Valters Paintner frequently quotes Christian saints from Benedict to Teresa of Avila, it is notable that her invitation is not to a distinctly Christian contemplative life, but into a creative, contemplative journey shaped by the reader's unique understanding of spirituality. She describes Teresa of Avila's interior castle metaphor "as a movement through concentric rooms of an interior castle until we reach the diamond at the center of our being."[71] While certainly in line with Teresa's metaphor, Valters Paintner's description lacks the specificity of Teresa's imagery about what lies at the center of the castle (the light of Christ). Throughout *The Artist's Rule*, Valters Paintner quotes

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[68] Christine Valters Paintner, *The Artist's Rule* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2011), 4.

[69] Ibid., 65.

[70] Ibid., 18.

[71] Ibid., 11.

extensively from the Christian scriptures and Christian saints and teachers, as well as those from other traditions (Zen, Buddhism more broadly, Sufi mystics, etc.).

This is less a critique of Valters Paintner and more an observation of the shape of the trajectory she forges: fluid in its boundaries, general or vague about its goals, and individualized (rather than communal) in the actual embodiment of the trajectory. Her work is generative and healing, serving as a path and resource for many. The question of this project is whether there can be a generative pathway that is contemplative, communal, and generous in scope while also being specific in the invitation into (and resourcing of) Christian faith formation.

Processing Pain/Suffering: Benjamin Chavis, Jr., *Psalms from Prison*

As an ordained member of the clergy in the United Church of Christ, Benjamin Chavis, Jr. was sent to Wilmington, North Carolina to assist in and organize desegregating efforts in local schools. Chavis faced oppressive backlash and resistance from segregationists and white supremacists and, after an incident of violence and rioting, Chavis and nine others were wrongfully arrested and indicted on charges of conspiracy and arson. After serving a decade in prison, Chavis (along with the others, known as the Wilmington Ten) was eventually released and pardoned after the charges were overturned.[72]

Chavis wrote extensively from jail, eventually publishing two books written while imprisoned, including *Psalms from Prison*, in which he writes that "the prison cell

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[72] The History Makers, "Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.," accessed November 26, 2019, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/benjamin-f-chavis-jr.

became a place to do theology as a critical function of the ongoing freedom movement."[73] In the introduction to *Psalms from Prison*, Chavis describes "the prison system in the state of North Carolina…[as] a viciously cruel place…[yet it] was the place that provided me with a unique opportunity to engage in consistent struggle and reflective dialogue with God and humanity."[74] *Psalms from Prison* is a written collection of poetic prayers, often using imagery, wording, and frameworks from biblical Psalms, directing Chavis' lived experiences of pain and injustice toward God in lament. Consider Chavis' "Psalm 63:"

> In my distress, O God,
>   from a dark prison cell in america
>   I urgently summon thy aid.
> O God, I am in misery;
>   inside a filthy feculent north carolina dungeon
>   my spirit awaits thy disburdening relief
>
> For thou hast assured me, O God;
>   thou hast made me confident
>   that thy deliverance is near.
> Grant me the determination,
>   render me the stamina
>   to make it through this ungodly journey on earth.[75]

Chavis' work is generative and fitting for this project in its modeling of a way forward in the midst of experiences that are painful, unwanted, or unjust. While falling within the trajectory of lament found in the Scriptures (from the Psalms, Lamentations, and Job through the suffering of Jesus on the cross depicted in the gospels) and finding a home alongside the faithful writing of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila in the midst

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[73] Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., *Psalms from Prison* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), xx.

[74] Chavis, Jr., *Psalms from Prison*, xvii.

[75] Ibid., 72.

of their own suffering, the practice of lament has been less welcome and evident in historically white movements of American evangelicalism. Soong-Chan Rah writes that "The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost…the absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in the loss of memory…we forget the reality of suffering and pain."[76]

In *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara Holmes writes:

> Unfortunately, we have few devices to handle the eruption of spiritual events into our ordinary lives…If you listen to testimonies of immediate and personal spiritual experiences, you will inevitably hear "spectator" language that describes disruptive spiritual exotica. The presumption is that these movements cannot be easily interrogated and that they are not subject to the type of reflection that yields enlightenment or insight. Moreover, the impact of these ineffable moments on individual seekers further privatizes the religious experience in ways that undermine the interpretive power of a community.
>
> By contrast, the communal contemplative practices of the black church provide an interpretive grid that synthesizes inner and outer cosmologies. It is the community and not the individual monastic that becomes the concern. The spiritual practices become public theology through acts of shared liturgical discernment. These acts of shared contemplation move individual mystical events from the personal and private toward the public and pragmatic. Accordingly, the inward journey transcends the private imagination to become an expanded communal testimony."[77]

These words highlight the critical and generative nature of writings like *Psalms from Prison*. Just as Thomas Merton and Frederick Buechner share their own story and seek to invite others into the sacred potential of finding their own story in the story of

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[76] Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2015), 23.

[77] Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), Preface, Kindle Edition.

another, so Chavis' work, emanating from the witness of the black church, is attempting

to do more than share a sad story or painful collection of poetry. Instead, an individual

spiritual practice (such as Chavis' re-writing or co-writing alongside the Psalmists)

becomes what Holmes describes as "public theology," "shared liturgical discernment,"

and an "expanded communal testimony" synthesizing "inner and outer cosmologies."[78]

This movement from the individual to the communal, from personal to public, is essential

for a holistic and generative spirituality inclusive of early and late stages of faith

formation.

This final section is subtitled "trajectories of generative spiritualty" because they

each, uniquely, embody and invite pathways through complexity and disorientation.

While each writer represents a larger community, the actual written resources surveyed

largely focus on an individual's journey, rather than a holistic and collective space of

spiritual formation. This project expounds on these generative trajectories in order to

push toward a collective and communal vision of faith formation. These resources—from

the philosophical constructs of McClendon and MacIntyre to the development

frameworks of Wilber, Fowler, and Hagberg and Guelich, to the generative trajectories of

Merton, Valters Paintner, and Chavis, Jr.—together help shape a way forward for a

constructive and communal spiritualty across seasons and stages of faith.

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[78] Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

THE NEW WORLD MILLENNIALS CALL HOME:
EMERGING TRENDS IN FAITH AND LIFE TOGETHER

The previous chapters explored frameworks of faith development, arguing that

faith development, following overall patterns of human growth and development, is a

dynamic journey with contours and stages. Like human development, some of these

stages are more complicated and difficult than others. Just as most adults would likely not

choose to relive their adolescent years, so people may not look with fondness upon

disorienting seasons of deconstruction and dark nights yet each season, whether marked

by celebration or disruption, carries vast potential for faithful formation. Some seasons of

faith have been more clearly mapped than others, but trusted guides exist for each

contour of the human journey of faith. Even so, navigating the human journey of faith

will always require some element of initiative, difficulty and struggle, as this is necessary

for growth and transformation.

The human journey toward God has always held complexity, and the resources

collected over the centuries, notably the writings of Teresa and John, are a critical help

for those navigating the life of faith in the twenty-first century. Churches unmoored from

the diverse traditions and history of Christian faith do a disservice to their congregants by

withholding or downplaying the wisdom of faith offered by disparate traditions. Yet, while there is a wealth of resources available from those who navigated faith before us, the critical and uncharted shifts in the world named in Chapter 3 raise entirely new questions about the world and the journey of faith; new maps are needed to chart the journey ahead.

I write this chapter while megafires burn millions of acres across my home state, due in large part to the ecological ramifications of an unchecked and too-often unacknowledged climate crisis. I am sitting in a church building that has been shuttered for seven months because of a global pandemic that has caused over 200,000 deaths in the United States and brought both unprecedented restrictions on the routines of everyday life and economic turmoil that is further separating those who have access to the world's wealth from those who do not.[1] While change is universal to the human experience, the pace and type of change has quickened, resulting in a vastly different world in which to navigate life and faith.

This chapter explores ways Christian faith is navigating a changing world, examining the intersection of classic resources of faith formation, traditional understandings of incremental shifts in human culture, and the unique realities emerging in the world beginning with the millennial generation and the generations that will follow. The church has not always adapted well to a world in flux. The disruption and disorientation of the twenty-first century world is felt by all people whether or not they share a Christian faith. From the major globalizing movement rooted in the

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[1] Megan Cassella, "A Tale of Two Recessions," *Politico*, September 7, 2020, accessed September 8, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/07/income-inequality-wealth-gap-409234.

Enlightenment and Industrial and Technological Revolutions to the shifting sociological realities of the millennial generation and those following, in many ways, everything has changed and everyone must adapt. In the shifting landscape the church's faithful presence and witness to God's work in the world has the potential to provide grounding space for humans to thrive and flourish if the church can faithfully adapt. This chapter explores the major shifts and trends in the world and the implication of those shifts and trends for the human experience of God and the journey of faith.

Culturally-Responsive Faith: Human Development and Generational Shifts

The creation narratives of Genesis and the descriptions of the cosmos (e.g. Jb 39; Ps 74; Eccl 1) reveal the world as alive and, therefore, constantly changing. The world God created is neither static nor stagnant, and human creatures are commanded to participate in the ongoing cultivation of this living earth teeming with life. Within a few chapters, humans emerged from the garden and began to build cities (Gn 4:15). It is these human-constructed cities that God encourages the Israelites to cultivate and that will contribute to their prosperity (Jer 29:7). The final vision of restoration given in the Scriptures is one of a garden embedded within the open walls of a city (Rv 22). While the pace of the world's change has undoubtedly quickened in the last century, there is "nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9), change included.

Even with a faith rooted in sacred stories regularly marked by movement and change, the church has regularly struggled with the shifts and trends in the cultural context in which it is situated. From the Israelites desire to be like the monarchic nation-states surrounding them to Paul's letters guiding the early church in its relationship with

cultural differences, the Scriptures point to a faith continually contextualizing in relationship with the wider world. The ongoing dialogue between the Christian community and its surrounding culture has continued throughout the church's history, evidenced across continents and centuries, from Schleiermacher's writings to the "cultured despisers" of faith[2] to the twentieth century Scopes Trial navigating the "clash of science and religion"[3] (an early foray in what has become an increasingly litigious battle between religion and changing cultural norms). Christianity's responsiveness and adaptability to culture has been provoked in part by its internal wrestling through its interpretative literalness. Whether Origen's creative hermeneutics, Rudolf Boltmann's project of demythologizing the life of Jesus, or the more recent and popular explorations of a literal Christianity by writer AJ Jacobs or the late Rachel Held Evans,[4] the Christian community, at its core, is an interpretive community in conversation with a changing world.

Faith Formation and Human Development

The human life cycle has been used analogously alongside Christian faith as long as there has been a Christian faith. As Paul writes about faith formation in his first letter to the Corinthian church, "when I was a child I used to speak like a child, reason like a

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[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher," accessed October 8, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schleiermacher/.

[3] Noah Adams, "Timeline: Remembering the Scopes Monkey Trial," https://www.npr.org/2005/07/05/4723956/timeline-remembering-the-scopes-monkey-trial.

[4] See, for example, A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2008) or the adjacent work by Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

child, think like a child. But now that I have become a[n adult], I've put an end to childish things" (1 Cor 13:11). Paul's imagery speaks of faith as a process that matures similarly to all human maturation: a linear progression from birth, much like a race with a beginning and end with the goal to have "kept the faith" (2 Tm 4:7). As outlined in the previous chapter's literature review, James Fowler's work on faith stages similarly parallels human and faith development, though with the increased complexity allowed by insights of modern psychology.[5]

While Paul wrote somewhat dismissively of a faith he describes as "childish things" (1 Cor 13:11) for the rhetorical purpose of encouraging faith maturation, Fowler and others explore the unique and beautiful ways infants and children navigate faith from their earliest moments. Research suggests "babies come into the world with an intact spiritual attunement… They are naturally connected to the transcendent – to nature, to ritual, symbolism, dreams, empathy, and mystical experiences."[6] Fowler in particular maps his stages of faith to specific age ranges, with infants experienced the "pre-stage called Undifferentiated faith,"[7] three to seven years olds most typically experiencing "Intuitive-Projective faith,"[8] and pre-adolescents navigating the "Mythic-Literal faith" focused on "stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolizing belonging."[9]

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[5] Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 22-23.

[6] Diana Divecha, "How Does Spirituality Grow in Children?," *Greater Good Magazine*, accessed September 25, 2020, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_does_spirituality_grow_in_children. Divecha references the work of Dr. Lisa Miller in *The Spiritual Child* (New York: Picador, 2016).

[7] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 121.

[8] Ibid., 133.

[9] Ibid., 149.

For Fowler, the first three stages (along with the "prestage" of infant spirituality) track with childhood development and the later three stages map onto adulthood, though Fowler suggests that many adults experience a "permanent place of equilibrium" at the "Synthetic-Conventional" faith stage, never progressing past this point.[10] Fowler's later work in *Faithful Change* offers a more nuanced description of faith formation in light of what he calls the "challenges of postmodern life,"[11] and as noted in the previous chapter, Fowler's work offers a seminal (though limited, perhaps, by its linear nature) understanding of human faith development. Because the world is not static, the dynamics of faith cannot simply mirror the linear movement of human development, but must also recognize how it is shaped by the contours of the changing world.

Faith Formation and Generational Cohorts

Along with an understanding of human development, the study of generational differences adds to a nuanced understanding of faith. Generational cohorts name the ways subtle and overt changes in the world taking place over the course of decades impact the way humans of similar age experience and navigate the world. From Tom Brokaw's 1998 book *The Greatest Generation*[12] to the stereotype of the lazy millennial,[13] demographic analyses (rooted in generational differences and ranging from anecdotal to research-

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[10] Ibid., 173.

[11] Fowler, *Faithful Change*.

[12] Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[13] See, for example, Michael Hobbes, "Millennials are Screwed," HuffPost Highline, accessed October 8, 2020, https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/poor-millennials/. Hobbes writes: "Not only are we screwed, but we have to listen to lectures about our laziness and our participation trophies from the people who screwed us."

based) are used to explain everything from purchasing habits to technological aptitude to political persuasions. Anecdotally, when I gather locally with other pastors, these generational cohorts are often the explanations given for ministry strategies and both church growth and church decline. Generational understandings are undoubtedly helpful, but they are also inherently limited by their incremental understanding of human change.

Building from Fowler's linear psycho-social map of faith stage, accounting for generational differences adds the necessary nuances of the impacts of major events like global wars and economic recessions and major milestones in human achievement, like the invention of the printing press, the moon landing, or the advent of the internet or social media. Human development is directly impacted by these socio-cultural events and turning points. Cultural assumptions about the average eighteen-year old, for example, have changed dramatically from the 1940s to today; the markers and timetable for adolescents moving into adulthood (and, in Fowler's framework, navigating the shift into the equilibrium of adult faith) have shifted, and generational cohorts name these incremental changes necessary for navigating the changing world.

Assumed within this framework of generational shifts, however, is that the world's rate of change remains fairly constant and that humans shift incrementally, responsively, and collectively together over the course of twenty or thirty years. While undoubtedly helpful, this traditional approach of generational cohorts can fail to take into account the massive shifts of a world upended and the pace at which such shifts are happening. The common depiction of the thirty-something millennials living in their basement is contrasted with the baby boomer who, in their early twenties, married, purchased a home, and settled into their first (and last) job. Yet the external conditions

surrounding each of these decisions (marriage, home, and career) have shifted dramatically (the sociological analysis of Christian Smith, explored below, helpfully illuminates this shift).

Tracking the incremental societal developments and changes impacting the human experience is undoubtedly helpful. However, this project suggests that in recent years the scope of change has broadened and the pace quickened. Emerging generations experience a world not incrementally different from that of their parents but substantively different, mired with multiple instabilities and crises (student loan debt, economic recessions, global instability, the collapse of truth, etc.). The remainder of this chapter explores this vastly different world through the lens of emerging adulthood, the millennial generation, and the shifting posture toward faith and spirituality.

Permanent Crises and Epochal Shifts: Faith and Emerging Generations

In 2009, Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky wrote of the economic recession taking place at the time as a "(permanent) crisis" and a moment requiring a new type of leadership for a changed and changing world that "[builds] capacity to thrive in a new reality."[14] A confluence of events, or a string of "permanent crises,"[15] brings a particular uniqueness to life in the early twenty-first century. New realities face the church specifically and all humans broadly, at least in Western

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[14] Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, "Leadership in a Permanent Crisis," *Harvard Business Review*, accessed September 9, 2020, https://hbr.org/2009/07/leadership-in-a-permanent-crisis.

[15] Ibid.

contexts.[16] Even the instabilities are unstable with no common, consistent, or clear enemy to blame or target. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith writes, "it is a different world today…[and] to think otherwise is to self-impose a blurred vision that cannot recognize real life as it is experienced today."[17] He continues, "the world we live in itself has become much more complicated, pluralistic, and arguably morally challenging than it was before."[18]

Layered onto these complexities and crises is the eradication of a baseline of agreed-upon truth, manifesting in a rejection of both governmental and scientific authorities and the widespread proliferation of conspiracy theories. American Christianity is more frequently being found at the center of this confusion; the pastor of a California megachurch made recent headlines for preaching "there is no pandemic" in the midst of a pandemic,[19] and the QAnon conspiracy is fueled by American evangelicalism with the "language of evangelical Christianity [defining] the Q movement."[20] These are simply the latest headlines from this year after decades of the world being holistically reshaped by connective technology, globalized industry and ethically-unmoored economics. An incremental generational critique of millennials fails to recognize the ways the world has changed. The previous scripts (even slightly modified) for religious faithfulness or even

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[16] The assumption is not that non-western contexts are not also experiencing paradigm shifts and new realities but simply that they are beyond the scope of this project.

[17] Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 227.

[18] Ibid., 68.

[19] Yonat Shimron, "John MacArthur claimed there is 'no pandemic.' He was politicizing science, experts say," accessed September 8, 2020, https://religionnews.com/2020/09/01/john-macarthur-claimed-there-no-pandemic-he-was-politicizing-the-science/.

[20] Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q," *The Atlantic* (June 2020).

basic human decency simple cannot account for the full complexity of today's (much less tomorrow's) world.

A variety of frameworks and lenses name the massive shift the world has taken. Philosophers talk about the movement from modernity to postmodernity.[21] The framework of spiral dynamics maps the evolution of human consciousness and suggests humans have just recently begun to explore "second tier" consciousness, an epochal shift in human development.[22] James Fowler traces the current shifts back several centuries to the Enlightenment, which he argues was "a movement in history in which humankind, in a collective evolution of consciousness, began a serious shift in forms of knowing and ways of holding faith….now [that shift] is happening far more rapidly, and on a global basis."[23] From a Christian perspective, Phyllis Tickle wrote of "the great emergence" of new forms of church and practices of faith to adapt to a massive shift Tickle suggested is patterned to occur every 500 years.[24] This is a unique season of human history that requires a unique embodiment and faithful witness of the church. There is also an urgency needed; Bill Plotkin forebodingly questions whether "the twenty-first century [will] turn out to be the Great Ending or the Great Turning."[25]

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[21] See, for example, the previously referenced James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

[22] Don Beck et al., *Spiral Dynamics in Action*, 26.

[23] James Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 15.

[24] Tickle, *The Great Emergence*.

[25] Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 5.

Emerging Adulthood and the Millennial Generation

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard asked whether this moment was a blizzard, an early winter, or an ice age.[26] While a blizzard would be a temporary storm to weather and an early winter would be require incremental shifts to adjust and adapt, the idea of this moment as an ice age suggests a watershed moment "in which many assumptions and approaches must change for good."[27] In a sense, the COVID pandemic has been an ice age within an ice age, as the world had already been experiencing the massive shifts underway for decades onto which COVID-19 was layered. Particularly in the industrialized world, these shifts have resulted in a new developmental stage that development psychologists and sociologists refer to as emerging adulthood.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, research professor at Clark University, developed the idea of emerging adulthood as a "new life stage…lasting roughly from ages 18 to 25…[marked by] identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future."[28] Arnett notes the prevalence of this distinctive life stage particularly in industrialized countries where education is prolonged and marriage and parenthood delayed.[29] Emerging adulthood is marked by both biological and psycho-social changes to human

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[26] Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard, "Leading Beyond the Blizzard," *The Praxis Journal*, accessed September 8, 2020, https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Arnett, J. J., "Emerging adulthood," in R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds), *Noba textbook series: Psychology* (Champaign, IL: DEF publishers, 2020), accessed from http://noba.to/3vtfyajs.

[29] Ibid.

development, and for this project's focus, the sociological implications of emerging adulthood are particularly relevant.

Alongside the psychological research on emerging adulthood is the sociological research tracking the millennial generation (and subsequent emerging generational cohorts). According to the Pew Research Group, a millennial is "anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019) … with anyone born from 1997 onward is part of a new generation [Gen Z].")[30] While there is a category difference between emerging adults and millennials (one being a developmental stage and one being a generational cohort), for this project's scope and focus, the two terms will be overlaid and grouped together (though not conflated or used interchangeably) with the term emerging generations. This project is not focused on any age group as much as it is on the faithful witness of the church in light of the changes seen in and experienced by both emerging adults and more broadly emerging generations starting with the millennial generation.

In *Lost in Transition*, sociologist Christian Smith and his research associates develop a framework for thinking about emerging trends as uniquely new phenomena rather than incremental calibrations of the way things have been. Specifically, Smith notes six "macrosocial changes [which] have combined to create a new phase in the American life course:"[31] access to higher education, the delay or dismissal of marriage, changes in the global economy, extended parental support, birth control and sexual

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[30] Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/.

[31] Smith, *Lost in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

ethics, and the shift into post-structural and postmodern thinking.[32] Taken together, these shifts have resulted in an altogether new human experience of the world.

Smith's research points both to the potential and the pitfalls of this new experience and life stage. "Many youth today," Smith writes in *Souls in Transition*, "face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage to spend exploring life's many options as singles, in unprecedented freedom."[33] Yet in his parallel work *Lost in Transition,* which explores, according to the subtitle, "the dark side of emerging adulthood" Smith warns that emerging adults are under-resourced in their capacity for "good moral decision making and a morally coherent life."[34] Smith's research provides critical insight into the mind and worldview of millennials and emerging adults, but aside from offering poignant interrogations of faithful responses to the sociological data, Smith does not suggest or develop frameworks for faithful formation and generative spirituality for emerging generations.

Importantly, it is not only religious researchers who lament the way moral individualism has taken on American society and culture. In a recent Rolling Stone article, Wade Davis reflects on hyper-individualism's toll on American life:

> With slogans like "24/7" celebrating complete dedication to the workplace, men and women exhausted themselves in jobs that only reinforced their isolation from their families. The average American father spends less than 20 minutes a day in direct communication with his child. By the time a youth reaches 18, he or she will have spent fully two years watching television or staring at a laptop screen…
>
> Only half of Americans report having meaningful, face-to-face social interactions on a daily basis. The nation consumes two-thirds of the world's production of

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[32] These six shifts are outlined further in Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 13-16.

[33] Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

[34] Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 31.

antidepressant drugs. The collapse of the working-class family has been responsible in part for an opioid crisis that has displaced car accidents as the leading cause of death for Americans under 50.[35]

Undeniably, a new way forward is necessary.

The Generative Spirituality of Emerging Generations: Convening Magnets, Unbundling, and Ritual

Developmental data suggests a distinctive life stage and sociological research suggest a unique and, in some ways, unmoored approach to the world's complexity. This project's remaining two chapters explore a faithful and generative response to a changing world but first will examine research on the spirituality of emerging generations. David Setran (of Wheaton College) and Chris Kiesling (of Asbury Theological Seminary) build off the groundwork of Arnett and Smith to develop a "practical theology" of emerging adulthood.[36] In *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, Setran and Kiesling move through the developmental and sociological data discussed above, exploring the spiritual needs of emerging adults in the areas of "spiritual formation, identity, church involvement, vocation, morality, relationships and sexuality, and mentoring."[37] Like Smith, Setran and Kiesling share a fairly dim view of the spiritual lives of everyday emerging adults, highlighting research pointing to lives "marked by instability…, very focused on themselves,"[38] a spiritual life centered "in self-development rather than

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[35] Wade Davis, "How COVID-19 Signals the End of the American Era," *Rolling Stone*, accessed August 11, 2020, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/covid-19-end-of-american-era-wade-davis-1038206.

[36] David Setran and Chris Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

[37] Ibid., 7.

[38] Ibid., 3.

congregational commitment,"[39] while attempting to navigate a "fragmented moral climate."[40] They argue "many emerging adults see the actual content and stories of the Christian faith to be relatively unimportant in the ways they live out their spiritual lives [since] a healthy moral framework is all that matters."[41]

Smith's cautionary concerns in *Lost in Transition* about the moral ambiguity of emerging adults (shaped, no doubt, by Smith's own social location as a Catholic sociologist researching at a Catholic institution) are valid and necessary critiques. Setran and Kiesling's formative frameworks point to the helpfulness and necessity of ethical anchors, vocational resilience, and communal commitments that encourage human faith and flourishing. Setran and Kiesling point to research supporting a somewhat popular notion that emerging adults simply put their religious and faith life on pause or "[stow it] away for safekeeping until later in life" because of the unique and stressful demands of their life stage.[42] A counterbalance to this prevailing opinion shared by Smith, Setran, and Kiesling[43] can be found in the work of Casper ter Kuile and the Sacred Design Lab.

Originally a research group housed within Harvard Divinity School, the Sacred Design Lab is a "soul-centered research and development lab" to "explore and interpret

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[39] Ibid., 91.

[40] Ibid., 149.

[41] Ibid., 23.

[42] Ibid., 17-18.

[43] It is worth noting that Smith's own work also provides a counterbalance to the general pessimism of his *Lost in Transition*, with *Souls in Transition* and *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford Press, 2009) providing a more balanced and (at times) positive outlook on millennials and emerging adulthood, though still somewhat limited in both scope and optimism.

the changing landscape of community and spiritual life."[44] Unlike Smith, Setran, and Kiesling, ter Kuile and the Sacred Design Lab's research is specifically non-religious in its mission and scope; ter Kuile describes himself as a "minister for non-religious people"[45] and writes that "religious traditions that were supposed to serve us have often failed. Worse, many have actively excluded us. So we need to find a new way forward."[46] Despite the clarity and urgency with which ter Kuile writes of the need for a "new way forward," ter Kuile is not antagonistic or dismissive of organized religion, frequently and enthusiastically referencing sacred texts (including the Christian Scriptures) and Christian thinkers ranging from Thomas Merton and Jean Vanier[47] to Brené Brown and John Wesley.

Millennial Magnets: Six Recurring Themes Millennials Convene Around

Rather than seeing millennials and emerging generations pause their spiritual lives, the research of the Sacred Design Lab instead suggests millennials and emerging generations have radically shifted how they interface with their spirituality. In their research publication "How We Gather," Angie Thurston and ter Kuile map six converging themes that serve as magnets for millennial spirituality: community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, and accountability.[48]

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[44] *Sacred Design Lab*, http://sacred.design.

[45] Thurston and ter Kuile, "How We Gather."

[46] Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 4.

[47] While revelations about Vanier's personal life have led many, myself included, to distance from his work, it seems worth noting the shared sentiment both of respect for Vanier's vision and, presumably, dismay at the failure of his integrity and ethics. To be disappointed and disenchanted by a mentor's personal failures is not a uniquely Christian experience.

Thurston and ter Kuile explore how these six themes draw in and captivate the spiritual

needs of millennials in non-religious organizations ranging from Cross Fit and Soul

Cycle to Camp Grounded, "a summer camp for adults."[49] For each of these organizations,

"How We Gather" names the "ancestors" that gave birth to these new movements, and

notably name traditional church alongside Burning Man, yoga institutes, and social

service organizations.[50]

Thurston and ter Kuile are adamant about the meaningful, purposeful, and faithful

spiritual undergirding of these thematic magnets and highlighted organizations. Quoting

the work of sociologists Richard Flory and Donald Miller, they suggest millennials have

rejected "the spiritual [consumerism]" that shaped previous generations[51] and so while

"they are not interested belonging to an institution with religious creed as the threshold,

…they are decidedly looking for spirituality and community in combination, and feel

they can't lead a meaningful life without it."[52] This insight into millennial spirituality

could not be a starker contrast to the notion that emerging generations have simply

paused their spiritual lives.

<div align="center">Unbundling Spirituality</div>

Whereas churches traditionally meet multiple needs of their congregants by

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[48] Thurston and ter Kuile, "How We Gather."

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Quoted in Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

providing services such as spiritual teaching, personal counseling, relational connection,

and action and service in their community, the Sacred Design Lab suggests millennials

have shifted from looking for an organization rooted in a traditional all-in-one approach

to finding more specific needs met in a variety of organizations and communities. They

refer to this as "unbundling; "like never before, we're unbundling and remixing the

elements that help us make meaning of our lives."[53] Unbundling is "the process of

separating elements of value from a single collection of offerings."[54] Rather than find all

or many needs met in a single space, unbundling suggests millennials are willing to seek

out meaning, insight, wisdom, and connection from a variety of sources. In a sense,

unbundling is the deconstruction of the religious institution as the sole purveyor of truth

and meaning in our world, instead choosing to believe that truth and meaning can be

found across the landscape of stories in our world.

Religion-less Ritual

Casper ter Kuile's work has pushed specifically into the role of ritual for the

spiritual-oriented millennial generation. In *The Power of Ritual*, he outlines how

traditionally-religious practices like prayer, reading sacred texts, sabbath keeping, and

pilgrimage can be extracted from their historical religious contexts and serve as beneficial

sacred practices for humans apart from any creed, belief, or tradition.[55] Rather than

attempting to shroud or conceal the origin of these practices, ter Kuile explicitly names

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[53] Thurston, ter Kuile, and Phillips, "Care of Souls."

[54] Ibid.

[55] ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 24-25.

their religious histories and then extrapolates the universal human benefit from these practices, such as using the Christian practice of *lectio divina* with the "sacred text" of Harry Potter[56] or using a "four-part prayer practice" (Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Supplication) learned from a Catholic nun.[57] Drawing heavily from these religious practices, many that are specifically Christian, ter Kuile suggests that "where religious institutions have been mistaken...is that they've fallen in love with a specific solution, rather than forever evolving to meet the need."[58] For the church and those who wish to faithfully inhabit and invite others into the specificity of the Christian story, ter Kuile's critique (though contained within it is a rejection of Christianity as a centralizing story) is an invitation to continue the church's ongoing work of faithfully responding in response to the changing world.

Mutual Invitation and a Way Forward: Millennials and the Christian Journey of Faith

A confluence of change is upon the world, with global social changes intersecting changes in human developments and undoubtedly shifting the ways humans navigate their spiritual lives and organize communities of faith. The macrosocial shifts Smith notes in his research and Arnett's research on emerging adulthood connect to the increased conversation around faith deconstruction, with, anecdotally, more people experiencing later seasons of faith formation (deconstruction, and dark nights of the soul) at earlier life stages. The growing perceptions and frustrations at the church's

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[56] Ibid., 35-59.

[57] Ibid., 155.

[58] Ibid., 21.

unwillingness to effectively respond to a shifting world and the seeming frequency with which hypocrisy and moral failure play out among the leaders, teachers, and elders of Christianity in America play a role in this connection. A reputation for a church with a contextual and vibrant witness matched by a deep, abiding internal integrity is sorely lacking.

Here, the work of both MacIntyre and McClendon reviewed in the previous chapter is pertinent. If, as Smith's research suggests, there is a generation morally adrift and lost in the complexity of postmodern life, both an integral narrative (MacIntyre) and a coherent biography (McClendon) become critically important tools and frameworks for faith formation (explored further in Chapter 5's invitation to storytelling and biography as spiritual practice). Rather than recognizing the nuance and unique experience of an individual life, the church has, largely, relied upon a timeless foundationalism as the bedrock requirement for truth claims. This foundationalism is used as a safeguard to defend morality yet as the world has changed and as communities grow more diverse, the church itself, too often, has become morally adrift, even as it continues to rail against the specter of shallow morality in the twenty-first century world.

At some point, the inner journey so pronounced in the vision of Carmelite spirituality explored in Chapter 1 (modeling the teachings of Jesus and the early church), was eclipsed by the myopic conversionism and struggle for power notably present in the related movements of American fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Paradoxically, American Christianity has adopted an overly-propositional understanding of the gospel of Jesus (neglecting the ethics and embodied aesthetic of that gospel) while suffering from what Mark Noll called the scandal of the evangelical mind (which is that, as the first

sentence of the book reads, "there is not much of an evangelical mind"),[59] resulting in the

anti-intellectualism and anti-science that causes, to repeat an example from earlier in this

chapter, a preacher to proclaim that there is no pandemic while the world experiences a

pandemic.

Similarly, Soong-Chan Rah has written about the prevalence of celebration in

white evangelicalism's worship at the expense of biblical lament,[60] resulting in an

epidemic of racial injustice with symptoms not believed by many white Christians

(evidenced by the Vice President of the United States, an evangelical, arguing there is no

implicit bias in American's systems and structures despite all the evidence to the

contrary).[61] American Christianity celebrates when it should lament, and it turns away

from rather than saturating in truth. The American evangelical movement, rather than

being shaped by the life and teachings of Jesus, is marked by an overactive ambition,

unchecked allegiance to the nation state, underdeveloped imagination, and an atrophied

soul. And yet to only see this as a Christian problem or even more narrowly an

evangelical problem is to miss the wider reality that humanity (not just the American

Christian) has struggled to thrive and flourish in our current age.

The insights of Smith, Setran, and Kiesling as well as those of Thurston and ter

Kuile of the Sacred Design Lab are invitations for a more faithful and generative witness

in the church today. Even the research highlighting the emerging generations' pursuit of

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[59] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

[60] Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 22-23.

[61] See comments made by Vice President Mike Pence in "Vice Presidential Debate Transcript," *USA Today*, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/ 2020/10/08/vice-presidential-debate-full-transcript-mike-pence-and-kamala-harris/5920773002/.

non-organized, non-religious spiritual life can be seen as an eye-opening gift for the church struggling to resource, form, and care for human souls. While this generation of emerging adults may have inherited a world unrecognizable to most humans who have ever lived, and while there is no incremental change to an old script for living well, a faithfulness within the Christian story marked by integrity and humility is both possible and critically important right now. The emerging realities facing Christian faith and spiritual formation in today's world are undoubtedly complex, yet there is also great opportunity for a formative faith that takes into account the full complexity of life in today's world and of the contoured depth (rather than linear simplicity) of historic Christian faith.

Twenty years ago Duke Law professor Jedediah Purdy wrote that "our idea of success is an almost unworldly prosperity and security, our idea of failure the unextraordinary existence most of us actually lead,"[62] but perhaps success, for the American church and the American Christian, can look more like an earnest and faithful exploration of our own souls and spiritual journeys and that of those closest to us. The vision of life lived by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross so many centuries ago and more recently by Mother Teresa and Thomas Merton can guide both the interior and exterior work needed to live well and faithfully even amidst the "great turning"[63] we find ourselves in. The remaining chapters in this project will outline a way forward for

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[62] Jedidiah Purdy, *For Common Things* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 5.

[63] Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, 5.

Christian faith in the emerging world, focusing on a spiritual life that is both generative

and collective, united from early to late stages of faith in shared practices.

PART THREE

POSTURES AND PRACTICES FOR A
GENERATIVE AND COMMUNAL CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALTY

CHAPTER 4

A GENERATIVE SPIRITUALITY ACROSS SEASONS OF FAITH

The journey of Christian faith has always involved movement, from the first

humans walking with God in the garden (Gn 3:8) and Abraham and Sarah being told to

leave their land and family (Gn 12:1). As the world's pace of change has quickened, so

has the shifting of human posture and practice toward faith, resulting in the organized

faith community's difficulty keeping up with the very people for whom they exist. While

some still maintain a comfortable equilibrium of faith (Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional

Stage), more are experiencing the ways the world's disruption is changing their practice

of faith. Individuals also experience these changes differently; for any variety of reasons

and factors–age, relationships, education, exposure to a diversity of ideas, personality–

humans will move through the journey of faith at their own pace, informed by but not

determined by their cultural or generational context.

Just as one may take their first intentional steps of faith at any age, so various

seasons of faith can be experienced regardless of age, life stage, or generation. The

question driving this project is whether and how the church can be a community capable

of holding space for people across seasons of faith and faithfully form people within the

Christian story even as all approach faith from differing places in their spiritual journeys. This chapter explores postures and characteristics that help a church hold space for people in different faith seasons, while the final chapter, Chapter 5, looks at how specific Christian practices can be engaged for faithful formation with a community of people across seasons of faith.

The Metaphor of Journey

While Setran and Kiesling diminish the image of "the wandering nomad as the normative journey of emerging adulthood,"[1] this project suggests nomadic wandering is a generative and rich place of spiritual potential, for the Christian story is rooted in stories of characters whose "father was a [wandering] Aramean…, an immigrant with few family members" (Dt 26:5) and Jesus who "[had] no place to lay his head" (Mt 8:20). In the Christian imagination, to wander as a nomad is not to be a disgruntled rejector of faith, but to be a human in search of God, a posture of deep and vibrant faithfulness and a place of rich, formative potential. At risk of overusing the metaphor of a journey, it is an apt description of the spiritual life as witnessed in the Scriptures, the church's history, and in today's world.

Seasons as the Language of the Faith Journey

As noted in the Introduction, myriad frameworks name the shifts that happen in a faith journey. Fowler's work popularized the language of "stages of faith," while Hagberg and Guelich draw on Fowler's stages framework atop their trajectory-suggesting

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[1] Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 148.

language of "the critical journey."[2] In *Religious Refugees*, therapist and pastor Mark Gregory Karris suggests the language of "stages" carries with it an unhelpful connotation: "it seems to me that the word *stage* conveys an air of judgment. Stages assume that people move on to higher and higher planes of experience."[3] Karris instead chooses to speak of the diversity of faith experience with the language of "stations," the places "where fellow travelers gather. A few people remain in a seemingly unchangeable, fixed pathway throughout their lives, but most of us are changing, evolving, and traveling somewhere."[4] I appreciate and agree with Karris' critique of the linear and judgment-prone language of stages (common across any developmental framework, including stages of faith or spiral dynamics), and I appreciate how the language of "stations" communicates the critical importance of a trajectory or pathway on the journey of faith.

In this project and in ministry practice, rather than adopting either Fowler's "stage" language or Karris' terminology of "stations," I use the language of seasons. Seasons are ecological and cyclical; there is an expected rhythm and flow to their movement and yet an occasional storm or heat wave can catch us by surprise. The language of seasons creates room for repetition; deconstruction is not a singular event but often a series of unpackings, rejections, and new discoveries. Seasons make sense of the journey metaphor, central to Hagberg and Guelich's framework and resonant with the simplicity of the centuries-old framework of the three ways: purgation, illumination, and union (outlined in Chapter 1 and discussed again later in this chapter). Both stages and

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[2] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*.

[3] Mark Gregory Karris, *Religious Refugees* (Orange, CA: Quoir, 2020), 53.

[4] Ibid., 54.

stations carry a sense of accomplishment or arrival, which can mistakenly connect health and maturity with later seasons of faith. There is certainly room needed to talk about faith maturity, healthy human development, and spiritual growth and healing from places of unhealth, and the imagery of seasons can more adequately and helpfully name the ways humans are formed and weathered by these different environments where they live out their faith in God.

<div align="center">Normalizing Faith Seasons</div>

Psychological and spiritual insights gained by tools like the Enneagram or a personality test like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator have helped the church navigate the diversity of human experience. Adele and Doug Calhoun and Clare and Scott Loughrige, in *Spiritual Rhythms for the Enneagram*, map out key insights for human growth and faithful formation across the nine enneagram types, writing that "knowing our Enneagram number gave us eyes to see how image, wounds, lies, triggers, and default responses shaped us every bit as much as our faith."[5] It is not uncommon for preachers and pastors to utilize this kind of insight as they prepare stories, illustrations, or applications directed to specific personality types, genders, or vocational groups in order to increase the specificity and efficacy of their communication. In the same way a spiritual director or minister might use a tool like the Enneagram to broaden the scope of their empathy and efficacy, a growing awareness and communication of seasons of faith can invite a congregation to find themselves in a posture of faithfulness to God no matter their current season. Normalizing and educating around faith seasons can pique curiosity

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[5] Calhoun et al., *Spiritual Rhythms for the Enneagram* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 3.

within a congregation for the experience of someone else rather than fostering the assumption that all faithful expression should look the same.

In my own congregation, following an evening gathering convened specifically to dialogue about the experience of deconstruction, I invited those present to reach out to someone else who had been present but had communicated an experience different from their own. An older participant who, that evening, expressed their lack of experience with deconstruction and preference for a simple, traditional faith, paired up with a younger participant who spoke from a place of deconstructed faith without a clear sense about what reconstruction might look like for them. The honesty and humility from each person, despite their vastly different experiences of faith, sparked an unlikely and fruitful friendship with deepened understanding and empathy for each other and mutual growth.

Normalizing seasons can provide an orienting framework for those who desire a growing faith, and understanding seasons as a natural occurrence or even a grace given by God can prevent the pursuit of leveling up or attaining the next growth benchmark in faith. Faith can be matured in a season of deconstruction, but entering a season of deconstruction is not a sign of a mature faith. Some people's intellectual deconstruction overlaps with what Gerald May describes as the dark night's "experience of loss or desolation,"[6] while another person may deconstruct a problematic piece of their belief system quickly and simply by reading a book or talking to a mentor or friend.

I have been asked numerous times both what it means if one has never experienced something akin to a dark night of the soul as well as what it means if their

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[6] May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 97.

primary experience of faith could be characterized as a dark night. Another conversation partner asked what it meant that they could listen to the spiraling dialogue emerging from a friend's deconstruction without feeling the need to ask any similar questions of their own faith.

Pastor and writer Brian Zahnd says of deconstruction: "I understand the term and I get why some use it. But when I went on my big spiritual/theological transition, I never thought of it as deconstruction – more like finding the pearl of great price…[or] water to wine."[7] Describing what lies within the normative realm of a faith journey without prescribing what any one faith journey should look like requires nuance. The human experience of faith is varied and diverse. While committing to listening and learning from one another, we must also resist the assumption that our journey will mirror another's or that any one season of faith should be pedestaled or celebrated above others.

A Rough Map of the Spiritual Journey

This project draws from a variety of sources to discern a general shape of the spiritual journey, and while this project does not set out to create yet another model, I offer a rough map synthesizing the insights explored in this project. This map builds upon the classical model of the three ways (introduced in Chapter 1) of Illumination (seasons of awakening joy and new life where the deep wellsprings of life with God are accessible and abundant), Purgation (seasons of emptying the heavy burdens we carry and

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[7] Brian Zahnd, Twitter Post, November 18, 2018, 3:08PM, https://twitter.com/BrianZahnd/status/1063207107376365568.

navigating the complexity of loss of self and surrender that life's challenges necessitate), and Union (seasons where God's presence feels as close as our breath).[8]

Rather than seeing the three ways as three seasons of faith, this project instead sees them as three containers capable of holding different seasons of faith. The faith journey is neither linear nor equational. Since seasons can be experienced in different orders and with different levels of intensity, mapping seasons across these three containers allows for the flexibility and nuance needed to offer a guide for the journey without a strict prescription for what each journey will look like.

The classical understanding of the three ways can be mapped as a spiral beginning with illumination, dipping into purgation, and then looping around and rising in ascent toward union (Illustration 1, below). [9] The illustration has a natural trajectory which does carry some intuitive wisdom about how humans experience their faith; while there are exceptions, early faith is often experienced as a joyful discovery and celebration-worthy receiving of a grace that relieves burdens like fear, shame, and guilt. Union is positioned as the place where ultimate longing is met and the hope of salvation fully realized. What the classical three ways does not portray is the ecological rhythm and repetition that marks the human journey of faith. While union is indeed the culmination of Christian hope, as seen in the mystical experiences of both John and Teresa as well as in the

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[8] Even though it is written as a critique of Christian mysticism and the classical three ways, The Gospel Coalition published an overview of the classical three ways. Justin Taylor, "An FAQ on Christian Mysticism," *The Gospel Coalition*, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/an-faq-on-mysticism-and-the-christian-life/.

[9] The spiral visual of the three ways is an adaptation of a description of the classical three ways I received from Jim Martin, Vice President for Spiritual Formation at the International Justice Mission at a weekend retreat in January 2017.

everyday experience of humans, temporary and real experiences of Union can be found

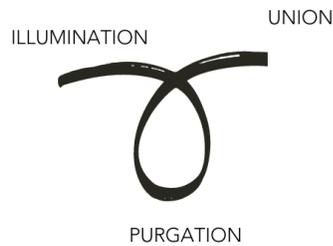before returning or moving into a different season.

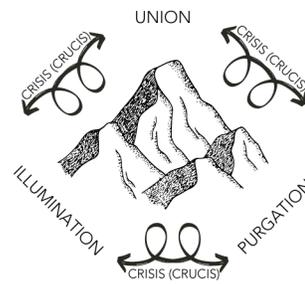**Illustration 1**   **Illustration 2**

Illustration 2 builds upon the classical model by more explicitly mapping the

rhythm and repetition that can occur with faith seasons and also by specifically naming

the crises or turning points that often mark the movement of faith seasons. Similar to

Illustration 1, Illustration 2 is not designed to map out specific seasons as much as to help

identify and locate the containers where a particular season might be found. The journey

is mapped onto a mountain (hearkening to John of the Cross' mountain schema with

movement toward union atop Mount Carmel[10]), with Illumination and Purgation marking

necessary parts of the approach and with Union elevated to indicate the teleological

nature it holds in the spiritual journey. Added to the three ways is a fourth container,

named Crisis (*Crucis*), found in the spaces of transition between seasons or containers.

Crisis (*Crucis*) is not a season in and of itself. Much like the role "the Wall" plays

in Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey*, it is not a season on its own but an

obstacle between seasons (or, as noted in Chapter 2's review of both Fowler and Wilber,

the challenge or situation requiring the shift or growth into a new season). Crisis (*Crucis*)

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[10] Kavanaugh, *The Collected Works*, 111.

serves as the ongoing hurdle, turbulence, or sieve to be navigated in order to continue toward maturity and growth. While crisis is often used to speak of a disastrous event, it more broadly can mean a critical moment such as the "turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death."[11] In this way, Crisis parallels the literary climax, which is not the point at which everything resolves but instead the point at which the reader becomes aware of how the story will resolve. Crisis is marked by the trajectory of the way of the cross (*crucis*) which, for Jesus, was not a chosen path but one that was willingly endured because of the hope that lay on the other side.

Differentiating between Purgation and Crisis (Crucis) is necessary as both can carry the connotation of difficulty or challenge. The emptying process of purgation can be difficult and wearisome, just as a sudden and bright burst of Illumination can be shocking and painful. Crisis (*Crucis*) is space in the journey to hold the transitions, whether painful or relieving, between seasons. The map indicates movement in multiple directions to recognize the ways repetition and cycles shape the journey, with the assumption that just as a season contained with Crisis (*Crucis*) can result in a movement from what Walter Brueggemann describes Paul Ricoeur calling the initial naivete ("pre-critical") to a second naivete ("post-critical"),[12] so the continued journey can result in repeated re-entries to new Illumination, where faith may be experienced with childlike

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[11] "Crisis," *Oxford Dictionary*, https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/crisis.

[12] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 25. Brueggemann's summary of Ricoeur's hermeneutical contributions are incredibly helpful, particularly when layered with Brueggemann's continued work on the trajectory and shape of the Psalms.

wonder and newness and naivete even numerous times.[13] With a roughly-hewn map of the spiritual journey, the remainder of this chapter will explore marks and postures of a generative spirituality that reaches across faith seasons.

Marks and Postures of A Generative Spirituality

This project, rather than prescribing or describing a healthy church, instead offers a modeled approach to a generative and communal spirituality rooted in the Christian story and committed to faithful formation regardless of where one might be mapped on their spiritual journey. The following marks and postures characterize an openness to the diverse experiences of humans across seasons of faith.

Collective

Paul R. Smith, in *Integral Christianity*, applies Wilber's integral principles directly onto faith formation in Christian contexts, and writes that "most churches tend to have one stage of consciousness as a dominant center with some members at preceding levels and others at following ones."[14] While Smith is writing specifically about the dynamics of integral theory, the same can be said of churches focusing their energy on a particular season of faith as a "dominant center" at the expense of others. Most often, the excitement and new life of early faith is celebrated while later faith formation (in seasons containing the complexities of deconstruction or dark nights, for example) takes a diminished role. In my own childhood faith environments, my understanding of the

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[13] While, again, in Brueggemann's summary, Ricouer speaks of a definitive shift from the "pre-critical" to "post-critical," it seems consistent with Ricouer, Brueggemann, and the flow of the Psalms to suggest that this is a continuing, rather than one-time, process. Ibid.

[14] Paul R. Smith, *Integral Christianity* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 8.

purpose of being a Christian was to evangelize and help other people become Christians, so a person gifted in or focused on evangelism was the marker of a mature faith. Testimony of God's work was almost exclusively used to share your own or someone else's conversion story.

Another detrimental effect of centering any one season of faith as normative is seeing those in the midst of other seasons of faith as a problem to be solved or a project to fix. As a collective witness, the church is invited to walk together and learn from one another, offering assistance and aid where necessary but not diagnosing as bad or unhealthy that which is simply different. The reality that our spiritual lives are spread across seasons is not a reason to splinter our faith communities into groups of only like-seasoned humans. Those in the joyous, early seasons of faith should celebrate alongside those who are experiencing a dark night, and those in a dark night should have the open and comforting presence of others as they walk through seasons of wilderness. As Fowler writes, "this journey [of faith], while personal, is not solitary."[15] The Christian story invites us to walk together. A generative and collective spirituality across seasons of faith is not only possible but also healthy and healing, particularly for those who have experienced hurt and distance from the church.

Ironically, many segments of the church neglected this inward journey while at the same time becoming hyper-individualistic: an individualism without attention to the inward. Mark Baker writes that "built into this [individualistic, spiritualized] lens is the

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[15] Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 17.

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idea that future-individual-salvation of the soul is the center of Christianity,"[16] and quotes Renee Padilla who writes "the individualism of 'culture Christianity' …sees the Lord with only one eye, as an individualistic Jesus who is concerned with the salvation of individuals."[17] Baker calls this theological shift a "religious subversion of Christianity."[18]

Holistic

Baker and Padilla's critique above links the collective nature of faith to the holistic nature of faith. Neither Jesus nor the historic Christian witness was interested in a myopic soteriology at the expense of a lived ethic in the world. From the characterization of Jeremiah as a weeping prophet to the suicidal ideations of Jonah and Elijah and the agonizing pain of Hannah and the frustration and anger of Job, the Scriptures offer examples of faithful expression across the full range of human emotion. For the Christian, no emotion or feeling is inherently wrong and all can be channeled toward God in hope and trust of transformation.

Similarly, no topic or question arising in the ongoing project of creation is outside the purview of Christian faith; as writer Rob Bell has quipped, "everything is spiritual"[19] and as Paul writes to the Colossian church, "all things were created through [Christ] and for [Christ]…and all things are held together in [Christ]" (Col 1:16-17). Nothing–no

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[16] Mark Baker, *Religious No More* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 57.

[17] C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 22 as quoted in Mark Baker, *Religious No More* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 166.

[18] Baker, *Religious No More*, 58. While Baker uses "religious" negatively, correlating to the "spiritual but not religious" sociological identifier, I find religion a helpful word to speak of the tangible organizing practices of faith and spiritual formation

[19] Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2020).

topic, no emotion, no question, no season of life or faith–is outside the purview of a church pursing a generative spirituality. Rainer Maria Rilke's mystical invitation–"let everything happen to you, beauty and terror, just keep going, no feeling is final"[20]– illustrates the risk and potential of a the holistic invitation of a generative spirituality across seasons.

Disorienting and Disrupting

Christian Smith notes that "religious faith and practice generally associate with settled lives."[21] Yet, as Chapter 3 of this project has explored, emerging generations are living in a world that is increasingly unsettling. Not only are young adults starting careers and marrying later in life (two of the traditional marks of what Smith is referring to as "settled lives") but those marking points are less settling than they used to be with the frequency of both divorce and career changes. The world's chaotic unpredictability provokes the question of how faith practice is impacted by a generation and a world that is more often and more quickly experiencing crises, disruption, and transition. More helpful than striving to return to days past when people were more and earlier settled, a generative spirituality embraces the invitation into the Christian life that, by nature, is disorienting and disruptive.

Rarely in the Christian Scriptures are humans settled and static. The Scriptural witness is not to a settled life but to a life of movement and change and an interior life that holds space for confusion and complexity and seasons of disorientation. Humans

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[20] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 119.

[21] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 75.

often experience a revelation of God in the moments of greatest challenge or disruption. Brueggemann's work on the Psalms is particularly helpful in navigating the contemporary human experience of faith and the way that contemporary experience relates to the Scriptural witness to the human journey of faith. Brueggemann writes: "the faith of Israel, like all human experience, moved back and forth between the polar moods of, on the one hand, deep anguish and misery and, on the other hand, profound joy and celebration. In this back and forth movement the people of Israel worked out the power and limits of their faith."[22] Just as the Psalms, the prayer book of God's people, models movement from "orientation to disorientation to reorientation"[23] so it is that a natural and healthy marker of a generative spirituality is the experience of disorientation.

While disorientation signifies a loss of trajectory and a confusion of navigation, a spiritual disorientation contains within it the potential for a generative trajectory. My former colleague Jer Swigart refers to the "pilgrimage of disorientation."[24] Swigart uses this phrase particularly in the context of the need for white Christians to dismantle and disavow the overtones and undercurrents of white supremacy from their faith. The language pairing pilgrimage (a positive pursuit) and disorientation (a disrupting disequilibrium) more broadly addresses the need for a faith that is both rooted and pliable, hopeful but not naively optimistic.

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[22] Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 67.

[23] Ibid., 9.

[24] Personal conversation on February 20, 2020.

Ordinary and Mundane

Mirabai Starr writes of Teresa of Avila that, after having an experience of union with God, "though she was diligent in her spiritual practice, her inner life was rather ordinary for the next two decades."[25] While, as Starr will note, Teresa's spiritual life did take a turn with visions and "God-states,"[26] reflecting on the two decades of "rather ordinary" spiritual life is critical. Particularly in religious environments that have pedestaled dramatic experiences of God or extraordinary manifestations of God's spirit, naming the health and normalcy of a spiritual life that is routine and rhythmic even when not ecstatic, emotional, or extraordinary is an essential normalizing truth. Just as this project encourages conversation and learning around seasons of wilderness and the potential of practices of contemplative quiet, so "rather ordinary" can be a valid and celebrated response when reflecting on one's season of faith.

My congregation's demographic is primarily millennials who are married with young children. For many of us, our life has been marked by a series of major life transitions every four to five years for as long as we remember. From the three divisions of primary school (elementary, middle, and high) we moved to four years of college followed by our first jobs and eventually the first years of marriage. As we are having children, there are fewer transitions on the horizon. After decades of quick turns and pivots every few years, the next season of life feels more like a long plateau until our kids graduate from high school. While life in this season will undoubtedly have unexpected

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[25] Starr, Introduction to *The Interior Castle*, 9.

[26] Ibid.

celebrations and challenges, it is a season where "rather ordinary" spirituality can take

root. The closing credits of Terrence Malick's film *A Hidden Life* begin with words

written by George Elliot (Mary Anne Evans) from the nineteenth century novel

Middlemarch: "for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts;

and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to

the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs"[27]

Conclusion

St. John of the Cross wrote of his dark night that it "guided [him…and was] more

lovely than the dawn,"[28] despite the way that this night also troublingly obscured his

vision of the way forward. Thomas Merton wrote "I have no idea where I am going. I do

not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really

know myself." Merton prefaces these words with "My Lord God" and continues with

"the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing

so."[29] Teresa said that "ultimately, there is no remedy for this tempest but to wait for the

mercy of God."[30] While there is no roadmap clearly outlining the way forward for

faithful formation in today's world, the church's history is filled with the wisdom and

insight of those who have journeyed across seasons of faith toward the hope and

fulfillment of ultimate union and life with God. Along with the postures noted above,

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[27] Quotation from George Elliot's *Middlemarch* as found in *A Hidden* Life. Directed by Terrence Malick (Fox Searchlight, 2019).

[28] St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 29-30.

[29] Merton, *Dialogues with Silence*, vii.

[30] Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 162.

particular practices help shape and guide the life of faith across its many seasons. The final chapter of this project will outline particular practices that can further a generative spirituality across faith seasons.

CHAPTER 5

EXPANDING IMAGINATION FOR SHARED PRACTICE

The previous chapters described the complexity of a faith that takes shape across

seasons and the ever-changing culture and context of the world in which the church is

called to live. Chapter 4 explored general postures for a church desiring to resource and

form people regardless of their season of faith, and this final chapter considers how

specific practices can faithfully invite humans into shared spiritually-formative practice

wherever they are in their journeys of faith. Beginning with an overview of the process of

spiritual formation and spiritual practices, the chapter moves to consider how specific

practices rooted in the Christian tradition–silence, story, sabbath, and eucharist–can reach

and resource people across seasons of faith.

Formation as a Human Reality

James K.A. Smith describes formation as an actualized reality for all humans.

Smith describes humans as "desiring agents" who move about life, shifting and changing

(being formed) in response to our desires and disdains in the world around us.[1] To exist

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[1] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 37.

and move in the world is to be in constant formation. To be human is to continually grow and change in response to the ways we experience the world and the cultures within which we exist. The church follows Jesus toward the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21), including the fullness and flourishing of humanity. The option, then, for followers of Jesus, is not whether we enter into formative environments and processes but which formative environments and processes we will intentionally enter into in order to be shaped and formed to be fully human and bear God's image in the world.

Dallas Willard frames the formation process into three aspects: a vision of life in the kingdom, the intention to be a kingdom person, and the means needed to live into the vision and intention.[2] Willard insists on the simplicity of this task set before the church. If the church loses "sight of the *simplicity* of spiritual formation in Christ…its practical implementation, by individuals in their own life or by leaders for their groups, will falsely appear to be extremely difficult or even impossible" resulting in, Willard suggests, the church not undertaking its mission and purpose to form and disciple people in the way of Jesus.[3]

Similar to Willard's emphasis on "the simplicity of spiritual formation,"[4] Setran and Kiesling stress in their work focused on millennials and emerging adults that formation (spiritual or otherwise) does not primarily take place in milestone or mountaintop moments but in the rhythms of everyday life. "Emerging adults, therefore, must begin to understand the power of every mundane moment in shaping their future

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[2] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 86-90.

[3] Ibid., 93.

[4] Ibid.

destinies…. spiritual growth happens not only in dramatic events of short duration but also in the ordinary activities, practices, and interactions of daily life."[5] Churches seeking to faithfully form followers of Jesus must consider how faith formation is taking place through the simple, everyday moments of life as it is lived throughout a normal week, not just in a weekly, prepared, clergy-led gathering.

<div align="center">The Centrality of Practice</div>

Given that all humans are constantly being shaped by their experiences, the church is responsible to articulate and point to the work of God through Jesus in the world while also resourcing and inviting people into specific practices that form humans for everyday life in God's kingdom. This formative preparation is not for life in a far-off place in the future, but for life in "God's kingdom [which] is already among you" (Lk 27:21). James Fowler writes of faith as "covenantal," which is both a reference to the role of covenant between God and humanity in the Christian tradition and to faith as an integrally relational phenomenon; "faith is everywhere a relational matter."[6] The church, then, is not just to invite people into isolated, individual practice but into a shared practice of life in the way of Jesus.

Ken Wilber suggests transformation occurs best through "integral transformative practice."[7] Though Wilber is not directing his words to practice contained with the Christian story (or any story, on its own), the principal applies to Christianity:

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[5] Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 43.

[6] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 33.

[7] Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, 31.

transformation occurs through practice and experiment. Jesus commends those with wisdom who "[put these words] into practice" (Mt 7:24), Paul exhorts the Philippians to "practice these things: whatever you have learned, received, heard, or saw in us" (Phil 4:9), and James writes that faith is shown by "putting it into practice through faithful action" (Jas 2:18). Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra write of Christian practices as a method of "rehearsing a way of life" that "address[es] fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts."[8] Mark Scandrette provocatively asks whether "Jesus [gave] his life on the cross so that we could sit around reading and discussing books about him, or so we could join the revolution."[9]

<div align="center">Core Practices and Creative Practices</div>

The most commonly-experienced Christian practices, at least in American evangelism, might be reading the Bible and participating in corporate worship (understood, mostly, as singing together). Both of these practices, while core practices of Christian faith, are often cerebrally-centered[10] and used to concretize a particular catechesis of doctrine and belief. Yet the intellectual certitude that is often centered by these practices can be jarringly disconnecting for those in the midst of deconstruction and un-identifiable for those who experience God's distance more often than God's nearness.

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[8] Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith" in Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 6.

[9] Mark Scandrette, *Soul Graffiti* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 237.

[10] While singing is certainly a more holistic and embodied practice (rather than simply cerebral), it is not hard to offer a critique of modern evangelical worship lyrics, which are often fairly shallow and repetitive, sung over simple chord progressions and common time signatures. This shallow practice of singing is what I am connecting with the overly-cerebral common practices of evangelical Christianity.

Driving across the southern United States several years ago, I saw a billboard with the words "The Way, The Truth, The Bible" layered on top of a visual of a large Bible. I was struck at the way such a simple message so twisted both the words of Jesus from the Scriptures (which point to Jesus, not the written Scriptures, as "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6) and the primacy of Jesus as the living "Word made flesh" (Jn 1:14). Many church doctrinal statements name the Bible as the ultimate authority, yet Jesus said that "all authority in heaven and on earth" had been given to him (Mt 28:18), and nowhere in the Scriptures do we see Jesus giving that authority to the collected Scriptures of God's people. Highlighting the centrality of Jesus is not to detract from the gift and witness of the Scriptures but to invite a wrestling with, rather than a simple submission to, the Scriptures.

How Christians approach the Scriptures is perhaps one of the most common catalysts or crises that cause a person to shift from a season marked by illumination or awakening into a season of deconstruction or a dark night. I have many conversations with people questioning the way they were taught to read and utilize the Bible. What was frequently modeled was a morning time of devotional scripture reading, a priority around memorization of the Scriptures, and the "usefulness" of the Scriptures (2 Tm 3:16) as an apologetic for their faith. Yet their world is now deluged with competing stories and an increasing attention to an ethic of flourishing life with little room for racism (much less slavery) or violence (much less genocide). The simple methods of reading the Scriptures literally and the simple answers found to answer pressing questions, for many, become brittle and frail, easily crumbling with little left to hold onto.

Thankfully, there are more ways to engage even these practices most commonly found in evangelical worship. The Scriptures can be engaged not simply for quick answers but also as a source of paradox or mystery. Just as Jacob faithfully wrestled with God in the flesh, so can we, faithfully, wrestle with the Scriptural witness we have been given. The Scriptural witness is not just to a myopic soteriology, despite attempts to reduce it to such. The simple and illuminating wisdom found in Proverbs is paired alongside the paradox of Ecclesiastes and the excruciating questions of Job. The promises of a "blessed" life in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5) must be read alongside the "woes" of Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6). And, again, thankfully, there are more practices in the Christian repertoire than those practices core and central to many evangelical expressions of faith.

Deeply Rooted, Highly Accessible: Practices and Formation Across Seasons

As Casper ter Kuile's work illustrates, spiritual practice can be a highly accessible invitation, even for those who would not identify with a particular religious tradition. In some ways paralleling Willard's VIM model, ter Kuile points to a framework he received from Kathleen McTigue: "intention, attention, and repetition."[11] This framework, ter Kuile suggests, demonstrates the difference between a repetitive daily habit or routine (e.g. hygiene or social media) and an intentional ritual (e.g. mindfulness or gratitude). While ter Kuile's work provides critical insight into emerging spirituality, this project's focus is not simply on a generative spirituality that is accessible to all but one that is at the same time deeply rooted within the Christian tradition. This project's focus on deeply

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[11] ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 25.

rooted and highly accessible practices is less about who participates in a practice and more about whether and how that practice is grounded within the specific tradition and story of Jesus-centered Christianity.[12] The remainder of this chapter explores four highly accessible and deeply grounded Christian practices: silence, story, sabbath, and eucharist.

Silence

Kalle Lasn writes, "We don't have a lot of space for quiet in our lives; we live in a noisy world. Quiet feels foreign now."[13] Each day our world grows noisier, and the growth and formation that occurs in silence and listening is more critical than ever. My wife and I have told our two young children that prayer is honestly talking to God, but we must also teach them that prayer is also patiently listening for God. Silence is a practice deeply grounded in the Christian story. Elijah heard God not in the chaos and noise but in a sound that was "thin and quiet" (1 Kgs 19:12) or "the sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12, NRSV). Job's friends sat with him for seven days in the grievous silence of lament rather than offering platitudes and quick answers. Jesus awoke early and traveled "to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer" (Mk 1:35).

Teresa of Avila writes that "many who practice prayer…complain of interior trials, grow depressed, and their health declines. They may even abandon prayer altogether. These are people who have not learned to look inside themselves and discover

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[12] An interesting example is the increased frequency with which mindfulness is taught and practiced in public schools. Even when removed from its religious origins (whether Buddhist or Christian), mindfulness can be a helpful human practice even though it would not, for the purposes of this project, guide participants into a healthy, generative, and collective spirituality that is specifically Christian and uniquely Jesus-centered. Mindfulness is not at odds with Christian spirituality even if it is not a practice of Christian spirituality.

[13] Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 14.

the inner world there."[14] God is not interested primarily or compartmentally in our exterior piety or our eternal status but in the whole of our being. Particularly in an evangelical culture that has shied away from the mystical, contemplative streams of Christianity, invitations into silence can be both jarring and deeply healing. Christian practices of silence can also be deeply grounded in the Scriptures, with *lectio divina* modeling a practiced approach to the Scriptures that preserves the centrality of the Christian narrative while inviting participants to trust that, in the silence, God is actively at work in their lives.

Practicing silence and listening together with those navigating different seasons of faith can be deeply encouraging and healing. Someone in an illuminating or awakening season of faith may say with confidence that God or Jesus spoke directly to them while another, from a season marked by purgation or crisis, may sense an inner voice inviting them to "bring [the] inner and outer worlds back into harmony."[15] Both responses can be true, curiosity-inducing, and also potentially uncomfortable.[16] Together, they can invite a deeper explorations of the full expression and depth of Christian spirituality without forcing a particular type of response that would be ill-fitting for a particular season of faith.

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[14] Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 92.

[15] Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 17.

Story

In *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner writes, "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours."[17] Christianity is a storied tradition, both telling stories and listening to stories with an openness to hear and dialogue with others and with God. It is both in the telling of *The Seven Storey Mountain* that Merton experiences transformation and in the hearing of that same story that listeners and readers are invited as well into transformation. As MacIntyre writes, "I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"[18] The Christian tradition is a narrative community, a community with its own story and also a community committed to helping others find their own "narrative unity" within a wider story.[19]

God's revelation to humans is often shrouded (e.g. Abraham's encounter with the trio of messengers in Genesis 18 or Moses' encounter with a bush aflame but not consumed in Exodus 3) or experienced, as Eugene Peterson says, "from a slant."[20] Stanley Hauerwas writes that "the very character of the stories of God requires a people who are willing to have their understanding of the story constantly challenged by what others have discovered in their attempt to live faithful to that tradition."[21] Catholic

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[17] Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, 30.

[18] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 250.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

[21] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 92.

theologians Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder connect dialogue and story with the mission of God and the mission of the church: "It was in dialogue that God offered and constantly renewed the Covenant… and in dialogue that God fully manifested Godself in the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus."[22]

Story as a distinctly Christian practice differs from the way story might be construed as a vague spiritual practice in, as McClendon suggests, the "self-scrutiny" it invites "in order to discover what God has been doing in [one's] midst."[23] James Fowler writes that "none of us is the sole author of the stories that compose our life."[24] As I have led my congregation in the Christian practice of storytelling and story listening, I am always struck by the level of depth that is mined, most often in the communal conversation and questioning that follow the telling of a story. As we train ourselves to listen well to each other, we (in the words of Margaret Wheatley) "move closer, [which] helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy."[25]

Sabbath

According to palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware, one of the most common regrets of those who are dying is working too hard over the course of their life.[26] Chuck DeGroat writes, "Busyness isn't a new phenomenon, and perfectionism isn't an American

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[22] Stephan B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 41.

[23] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, x.

[24] Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 54.

[25] Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 95.

[26] Bronnie Ware, *Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House Publishing, 2019).

invention. Humanity's struggle with labor and toil is primeval."[27] While work is part of

God's initial gift of creation, it was always bound and held in balance with rest and

enjoyment. The first thing in the Scriptures to be called holy is the rhythm of rest the

Scriptures call Sabbath (Gn 2:3).

Practicing Sabbath requires very little from humans, at least in terms of belief. No

matter one's season of faith, an invitation to practice rest and Sabbath can be received as

good (if not culturally strange) news. As Jesus taught, "humans were not created for the

Sabbath" but "the Sabbath was made for humans" (Mk 2:27). Jesus presents Sabbath as a

gift for humans, not just for eager new disciples or the committed faithful.

Reading Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross reveal the shallow nature of many

of our spiritual lives. Both write with vibrant, colorful, and ecstatic descriptions of life

lived with God and with attentiveness to the potential experiencing God's nearness can

have to invite us to live in the fullness of our humanity. Particularly in Western contexts

where busyness, consumption, and productivity are often the primary metrics for an

upwardly mobile, successful life, the practice of Sabbath points us, regardless of faith

season, to the deeper meaning and possibility of living as God's beloved. In a loud and

busy world, Sabbath invites a pause from the "six days a week we wrestle with the world,

wringing profit from the earth;" instead, as Abraham Heschel continues, "on the Sabbath

we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul."[28]

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[27] Chuck DeGroat, *Wholeheartedness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 26.

[28] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951), 13.

Eucharist

Perhaps no other Christian practice points as succinctly and clearly to the Christ-shaped life we are invited to live than the practice of Eucharist. Although the practice of Eucharist, in many Christian traditions, has become sacrosanct and exclusionary, the practice of Eucharist derives from the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples rather than an inaccessibly-high ritual. Nora Gallagher writes that this everyday practice takes on sacred meaning as "the sacred version of bread and wine [is folded] inside ordinary bread and wine."[29] One of the most common practices of Jesus (and one of the least common practiced today) was sharing meals with others, certainly including his close followers and friends, but also strangers and outsiders and religious opponents. In a world where Christians are warned against reading particular books or listening to certain podcasts, and Christian leaders are critiqued for sharing platforms or microphones with those who do not believe the right things, we have strayed far from the invitation and hospitality of the eucharistic table practice of Jesus.

In my own congregation, we have shifted from an occasional practice of Eucharist to a weekly practice and are now imagining how to shift it from a weekly practice to the central practice of our gathering together, sharing not just a regular moment of Eucharist but a full meal, marked by celebration, conversation, and hospitality where any and all are invited to join. The practice of Eucharist is both a sign and taste of the grace we have been offered through the work of Jesus and a reminder of the shape of life we are invited to live. Just as the body and blood of Christ are offered to us, so Jesus invites his

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[29] Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 102.

followers to "take up your cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). In a world of rampant, morally adrift individualism, the practice of Eucharist invites us to follow Jesus and live sacrificially and selflessly for the sake of those around us. In contrast to the prevalence of a myopic soteriology, Eucharist models a holistic invitation into a Christian way of life that involves belief in the work of Jesus and also a lived ethic in the world. Eucharist is not just a gift we receive but a posture we inhabit and extend into our neighborhoods and everyday life.

<center>Shared Practice Across Seasons: An Invitation into Life</center>

A generative and collective Christian spirituality is an invitation into the fullness of life. Rather than the focal point being a singular moment of conversion, shared practice across seasons of faith invites a continuing attentiveness to conversions, shifts, and change through ongoing transformative practice. Just as Jesus welcomed those religious insiders as well as those on the outside and outskirts of religious culture, political persuasion, or societal influence, so the church today can be a place of invitation and formation for all through highly-accessible and deeply-rooted shared practice.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project was birthed from the hope and conviction that the church can better welcome, resource, and form humans, particularly those in later seasons of faith too often overlooked. The church's witness has not always been that of good news. Too often the legacy and reputation of Christian communities is judgment, hypocrisy, and bad news; too many of us journey through our lives carrying shame and guilt rather than gift and grace. There is a better way forward.

The writings of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila serve as windows into the rich tradition of the Christian mystics often overlooked by modern Protestantism generally and evangelical Christianity particularly. Gerald May's work rooted in both human psychology and Christian history evidence that St. John and St. Teresa are not simply historical curiosities but wellsprings of knowledge, experience, and practice and continue to serve the church faithfully through their witness and writings.

Seasons of intellectual deconstruction and psychological dark nights share similar isolating tendencies, often because the church fails to provide either space for the questions prompted or resources with which to navigate these seasons of complexity. This project has explored a number of resources and frameworks to define and map these less-often celebrated seasons of faith, though there is certainly additional research and work needed (particularly for how these seasons are experienced and navigated outside dominant cultures of whiteness and Western Christianity). While the metaphorical wilderness has a vibrant history as a generative space where humans encounter God, perhaps the wilderness does not always have to be navigate in isolation and loneliness.

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The numerous resources explored throughout the project evidence both the need for and possibility of frameworks beyond a simplistic moral foundationalism and myopic conversionism. Particularly in a world that has dramatically changed and continues to change, the church must continually adapt to the realities facing emerging generations as it continues to bear faithful witness to God's work in the world. This requires shifts in both posture and practice. Generative trajectories of spiritual practice exist both within and beyond the Christian tradition that can serve the church as resources and invitations into a contextual, meaningful, and spiritually-generative practice of life together.

Despite myriad changes, what remains constant is that humans are created bearing the image of God (Gn 1:27) and, through the work of the Spirit, are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18), that we might follow Jesus and bear witness to the good news of God in the world. All the world's change does not move us beyond the scope of the Christian story. If anything, living in tumultuous and unprecedented times can turn us toward our often-unexplored inner terrain, a necessary landscape to navigate if we are to live wholeheartedly and sacrificially in the world. May we take this journey together in the hope and trust of finding transformation and healing, both personally and collectively.

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