

HAUNTED BY FAITH: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SIGNALS OF
TRANSCENDENCE IN NONES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty
of the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology
at Mercer University
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Atlanta, GA

2021

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DEDICATION

For my wife, Kelly, who has held my hand
Through great joy and great pain
and for my daughter, Avalon, who's smile is drawn by God
Their Abiding Love is the secret
To any good I may write

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Theology is meant to be fun! If it were a drudgery, its writing would not be so poetic and its ends so serendipitous! Dear reader, please understand that what you hold in your hands has been the product of the fun work of theology that has occurred over a six-year period! Theology, however, is never a linear progression toward the Promised Land. Each year of study has not been heavenly. During a span of six years, life has had its trials and tribulations, but it has also had its great joys and victories. Theology is not life, but it does happen in life, theological discourse and ministry becoming an imprint of our life with God and others. Theology becomes autobiography and autobiography becomes theology.

Fun, however, is never had in isolation. It involves others, both their play and sacrifice “on the bench,” so to speak, so that others can engage in the game of talking about God. It is meet and right to acknowledge those who have taken the field with me on what has proven to be a game of several overtimes.

First, I want to thank my wife and children for the long absences they have afforded me to complete this project. My wife has been on this ministerial journey with me for over 20 years. Though my vocational call to ministry has been quite unconventional, she has humored my persistence and stood beside me as I have wrestled with myself, the church, and God. Her sacrificial spirit, strength, and devotion are virtues I deeply admire and thank God for daily. A great part of who I am today is because she calls me her husband. She is more than I deserve and exactly what I need. I am confident without her support this thesis would have been relegated to the dustbin of history.

I thank my children, especially my youngest daughter, for not being too disappointed when “dad was downstairs writing” and I could not play dolls, read books, or even have time for a quick game of Uno. Our family routines at the house were disrupted several times so this thesis could receive attention. My three boys are teenagers, so naturally they like their space, but their lives have been an equal source of inspiration in completing this project. When this thesis became burdensome, and the work seeming impossible, they were often a reason for my perseverance. As their father, one of my greatest responsibilities is to model faithfulness, resolve, and divine virtue to the tasks God has given us. I hope they see that this thesis is what resolve looks like.

Secondly, I want to thank my good friends, Tommy Thompson, Joshua Fite, Chris Abney, John Nardozi, and Nate Pruitt. They have been recipients of my ideas even before the pointed direction of this thesis was conceived. It is cliché, but dialogue with them has often been “iron sharpening iron,” and my ideas have been strengthened because I have them as conversation partners. I thank you all for sharing life with me and am deeply appreciative for every text, email, or phone call where you have made this thesis stronger and encouraged me along the way.

Thirdly, I am infinitely indebted to my teachers. I wish I could repay them with more than words and somehow give them a tangible representation of my thankfulness. I hope this thesis, and my life, is worthy of their dedication.

I want to especially thank Dr. Denise Massey, Rev. Mimi Walker, and Dr. Michelle Brooks-Garber. Dr. Massey's seminar on spirituality was the first after nearly 2 years of no study. She reminded me of my gifts, called caring ministry out of me, and gave me a tool set with a lifetime warranty. The pastoral and listening skills I learned from her made this thesis stronger than it otherwise would have been. I want to thank Rev. Walker, my Ministry Coach, whose attentiveness, and empathy have always been contagious. She has been the good shepherd for me during this project, being the caring voice that comforted my sometimes-troubled spirit and providing pastoral resources with which to think about my vocation. If the Holy Spirit has a pastoral incarnation, it is Mimi Walker. Dr. Garber-Brooks also deserves special thanks. Her patience and keen attentiveness to detail has made me a better pastor, scholar, and writer. The writing seminars with her, a biblical refining fire if there ever was one, separated the sheep from the goats and forced me into narrower categories of research that made this thesis possible. Dr. Garber-Brooks has the patience of Job. I am honored to have sat under her instruction and guidance.

I need to give a special thanks to my thesis advisor Dr. Graham B. Walker. There is not a person on the planet with whom I have done more theology and from whom I have learned so much. In the early years of study, his words often gave embodiment to so much of what I *sensed* about my faith experience. He has a gift for simplifying the complex and I thank him for teaching me to think, read, and write accordingly. This thesis journey has included crisis, loss, and threshold moments, and through it all, he has been beside me. In a word, this thesis may be mine, but he and I crossed the finish line together. I thank you from the depth of my being for every ounce of energy you gave to this thesis. This word will not go forth in vain.

Fourth, I am filled with gratitude for the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology. This school is more than a community of scholars; it is a community of pastors that invest in their students. It is a place where making pastors is just as important as making scholars. I pray that this thesis, and my life, is representative of the grace, love, and passion for God that abounds in its halls.

Fifth, I would be remiss to not thank the faith communities that were a part of this journey: Cleveland First Church of the Nazarene and St. Luke's Episcopal Church. I began this project doing ministry in the former and was warmly welcomed into the latter in 2019. I thank both communities for supporting, loving, and shaping me, and allowing me to serve. I trust my work is a faithful representation of these contexts and can be used in their missions.

Lastly, I need to acknowledge my late father, Mitch Napier. My father passed away in the early part of my doctoral studies. It was sudden and unexpected. I have never known pain like I have known it in losing a father without warning. The effects of his passing have lingered over this thesis, and my professional life, saliently. To complete this thesis is a testament that he was my father, I am his son, and that death does not have the final word. The hard work of being faithful is more precious than the degree that is its result.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	ix
CHAPTERS	
1. Introduction: The West- Listening for Angel’s Wings	
Ministerial Context.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	3
Statement of Projected Goals	4
Limitations / Delimitations	5
Assumptions & Terms.....	6
Literature Review.....	8
Biblical and Theological Reflection.....	10
What is at Stake?.....	13
Significance for Self, Ministry, and the Church.....	14
Project Methodology and Methodological Rational.....	16
Plan for Evaluation.....	19
Final Assessment.....	20
2. A History of Philosophical Shifts: Charles Taylor as Tour Guide	
Leaving the Past.....	22
Protestantism as Handmaiden of the Secular.....	25
Secularism or Pluralism?.....	27
Taylor’s Game, Bourdieu’s Field.....	30
Biblical Frames: The Psalter & Acts of the Apostles	
Divine Whispers.....	34
Psalm 19: Creation as Holy Intimation.....	35
Acts 17.16-33: Paul’s Pluralism, Our Secularity.....	41
Theology: Perspectives From Below	
Phenomenology As Theological Method.....	45
A Universal Anthropology: Rahner’s Wager, Bevan’s Model.....	59
Incarnation As Theological Precedent.....	53
3. Staring into the Abyss: An Imminent End?	
Listening to Nones, Listening to Transcendence.....	55
Taylor Incarnate: Transcendence from Within.....	58

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

CHAPTER 3 (Continued)

	Page
Peter Berger: Transcendence from Without.....	60
Demographic Affairs: Recent Pew and Barna Data.....	64
Reflexivity and Emic Practice as Challenges to Research.....	69
A Qualitative Approach: Details on Method.....	73
Interviewing: Descriptive, Structural, and Contrast Questions.....	75
Those on the Journey: Sampling and Participants.....	79
Pastor As Ethnographer: Writing/Righting the Story.....	80
4. Transcendence: An Anthropological Vision	
Research as Revelation.....	85
Holy Coding: Data Analysis.....	86
Tradition.....	87
Obligation.....	91
Play.....	95
Damnation.....	100
Hope.....	104
Strengths and Weaknesses of Methodology.....	111
Haunted By Transcendence.....	113
5. Language As Atonement	
Implications	
Developing a Language: A Semantics for Missiology.....	115
A Taxonomy of Deep Symbols.....	118
Future Directions	
Local Theologies: Home- Root Metaphor, Incarnation as Imperative....	119
Great Commission as Ethnographic Mandate.....	122
APPENDICES	
A: Initial Grand Tour and Mini-Tour Questions.....	128
B: Entrance Interview Assessment.....	130
C: Exit Interview Questionnaire.....	131
D: Double Blind Sampling Invitation.....	132
E: Informed Consent.....	133
F: Taxonomy of Deep Symbols.....	137
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	138

ABSTRACT

NATHANIEL JAMES NAPIER

HAUNTED BY FAITH: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SIGNALS OF
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Under the direction of Graham B. Walker, Jr., Ph.D., Supervisor

Study after study demonstrates that Christendom is no longer the dominant regulative force it once was. Faith, specifically faith in the Christian story, can no longer be presumed as the dominant narrative in West. According to Pew Research, 1/5 of the US public and 1/3 of adults under 30 years of age, are now no longer religiously affiliated. To press the point further, Nones (persons who claim no religious affiliation) now comprise 20% of the total adult population and it is estimated only 15-20% of the US population regularly attends Sunday worship. The cultural landscape of American religiosity has shifted. This new culture, dubbed by philosopher Charles Taylor as *A Secular Age*, is milieu in which the church now finds itself.

Given the rise of the Nones, the church now has a mandate not only to label them, but to understand them so that it can better understand how to communicate the Gospel in a changing world. While data demonstrates a lack of devotion to institutional religion, one may wonder if there are expressions of something more than immanence in the lives of those that claim to be Nones? Is there a non-reducible experience to which their lives attest, expressions that are regular occurrences but not empirically justified? If so, what are they and might these expressions be a means of connecting people of faith to people who are non-religious? To this end, this thesis ethnographically explores the *sociological phenomena of signals of transcendence* in Nones as a means of discerning where the old world of the gods may still be operative experientially for those that have never been a part of organized faith. As a point of

further novelty, this thesis does not interview former Christians, but focuses on those who have been raised in this *Secular Age* and never had a personal confession of faith.

To accomplish this goal, this thesis has three primary large movements: theory (chapter 2), method (chapter 3), and research (chapter 4). After introducing the parameters of the thesis in chapter 1, chapter 2, explores the philosophical, biblical, and theological foundations within which to understand this problem and engage it. Charles Taylor sets the stage of our problem, providing a history of ideas that lead to our context. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory then provides a frame for understanding human behavior from within his concepts of *habitus* and *field*. The Book of Acts and the Psalter provide biblical engagement. Finally, phenomenology as theological method is introduced, and an anthropological model of contextual missions issued.

In chapter 3, method is specifically framed, with special attention to the various sorts of transcendence at work in persons. The project goes into greater statistical depth about the church's cultural challenges, and then turns its attention to the qualitative approach at work in this thesis and the reflexive interviewing method employed. This chapter ends with a brief description of the participants and a pastoral understanding of the role of ethnography within the missional enterprise of the church.

Chapter 4 is the main body of the reflexive interview process with human subjects and the application of ethnographic technique. This chapter uses five registers of Peter Berger and Edward Farley that occur across all interviews as a means of interpreting participant data. The categories of Tradition, Obligation, Play, Damnation, and Hope are explored in detail as viable transcendent signals in Nones. This chapter ends by framing these findings.

Lastly, the thesis concludes by offering a summation of the research and offering a taxonomy of deep symbols that are embodied in Nones. It presents the novel findings of the research, including the new root metaphor of Home for all signals. Finally, it argues that ethnography must be included in any new missiological mandate of the church.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE WEST- LISTENING FOR ANGELS WINGS

There is a generalized sense in our culture that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost...

...Almost every action of ours has a point; we're trying to get to work or to find a place to buy a bottle of milk after hours. But we can [now] stop and ask why we're doing these things, and that points us beyond to the significance of these significances.¹

Cultures are guided by narratives, strings of linguistic signals, that endow the present with meaning and enables participants to make sense of the world. For much of Western history the resounding narrative that has played this role has been that of Christendom. The history of western civilization was the history of the Christian Church. The discovery of the present, and one's ability to arbitrate it responsibly, was done in relation to the not-too-distant pantheon of Christian symbols, dogma, doctrines, and ritual. These were constant; they were foundational. The language of the Christian church dominated the western global scene, so much so that just decades ago it was not unheard of that a person would learn to read by reading the Bible, even biblical analogies being deployed publicly at whim when making a rhetorical point. For example, there was a time when many knew what was meant by the phrase "a fly in the ointment."² Thus it has come as quite a shock to ecclesiastical leaders and concerned laypeople that the powerful narrative of Western Christendom seems to have lost its affluence, and thereby, its influence. There may have been a time when Christendom established the rules of language, but such is no longer the case.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 307-308.

² Ecclesiastes 10.1 "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in the reputation of wisdom and honour." See Adam Nichols, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the Kings James Bible* (New York: Perennial, 2004). The King James Bible became a regulative cultural force in Western civilization, saturating culture with its nuance, phraseology, and rendition of God.

Indeed, the decline of Western Christendom is showing no signs of letting up. According to Pew Research, one-fifth of the US public, and one-third of adults under 30, are now no longer religiously affiliated. This is the highest percentage ever recorded in Pew Research studies.³ The disparaging numbers do not stop there. In the last 5 years, “Nones” (individuals who have no religious affiliation) have increased from 15% to 20% of US adult population: 33 million people now say they have no religious affiliation whatsoever and 6% of those people are atheist to agnostic in orientation.⁴ To make matters worse, it now appears that an estimated 120 million [or more] Americans have “no religious orientation in the sense of church involvement.”⁵ Recent sociology has further demonstrated that for the first time in recorded data, Evangelicals, Catholics, and the non-religious, are all equally represented in the American public.⁶

From a practical perspective, this means there are countless people who attempt to make sense of life without a presumed theological frame of reference, not to mention without engaging a particular Christian heritage. They do not have traditional resources with which to cope with the most challenging aspects of life or in which to express their greatest joys. They do not have a God to whom they regularly pray for comfort. They do not have a church on whom they can lean or in whom they can confide. They do not have a holy book they open in hopes of a divine answer. They are part of that ignominious group of people categorized as “Nones.”

³ Pew Research Center. “Nones” on the Rise. Pewforum.org. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-pm-the-rise/> (Accessed September 27, 2016).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ron Johnson, *From the Outside In: Connecting to the Community Around You* (St. Louis, Lake Hickory, 2006), 61.

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/13/us/no-religion-largest-group-first-time-usa-trnd/index.html>. Accessed 4/13/2019.

Despite the data, however, one cannot but wonder if in the day-to-day comings and goings of those who check the box “none” when asked their religious preference, if there isn’t more to their story than this *nothing*, perhaps even more to their stories than even they are aware? Are there transcendental elements of human experience, what Taylor above notes as the “significance of significances,” that surface with regularity in their daily lives? Might there be an irreducible experience in the lives of Nones that would testify to more than an empty frame of reference often referred to as the secular? Does the fluttering breeze of angel’s wings exist in the background?

Statement of Problem

Peter Berger responds in a resoundingly positive fashion and argues that humans share certain activities that testify to a higher ordering of their daily lives.⁷ The study of anthropology demonstrates that even humans without a faith confession adopt practices that would testify to a set of values that are not reducible to a purely immanent or empirical frame. Nones may not identify the structure of their lives as *theo*-logical, but *theo*-logic may not be far behind. From a missiological standpoint, it is important to identify these transcendental frames of reference that are unconsciously at work in the lives of Nones because in so doing Churches may have the opportunity to build hermeneutical bridges between institutional faith and secular aspiration, the two possibly embodying many of the same daily convictions though construing them differently.

Therefore, this study investigates the presence signals of transcendence in the lives of Nones. Particularly, it does so among the burgeoning demographic of those who self-identify as

⁷ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1969). The primary thesis of this text is that transcendent values saturate our lives, even lives we believe to be saturated in immanent frames.

non-religious persons and not former Christians. The primary guiding question of this project thesis is: **Where are signals of transcendence in the lives of Nones and how are those signs manifested?** This study pauses with this demographic to discover the cross pressured spaces at the intersection of the sacred/transcendent in the lives of Nones.

Statement of Project Goals

Firstly, then, the project identifies the points at which Peter Berger's signals of transcendence occur in the lives of Nones. Berger's signals are order, play, hope, damnation, and humor.⁸ To encapsulate a fuller range of transcendent categories, this thesis also incorporates transcendent signals found in the work of Edward Farley known as "deep symbols." His deep symbols are tradition, obligation, the Real, law, and hope.⁹ This thesis observes, via ethnographic interview, how these signals of transcendence are manifested in the daily life of Nones living in the cross pressured spaces of a secular age.¹⁰

Secondly, this study demonstrates via these signals, that the lives of Nones are more than empty immanent frames. As Peter Berger reminds us, "There is really nothing very funny about finding oneself stranded, alone, in a remote corner of the universe bereft of human meaning..."¹¹ Might those in the depths of secularity acknowledge a sense of otherness, or belief, and consider exploring those expressions in a religious tradition? What could be the results of using categories

⁸ Berger, 53-70.

⁹ Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹⁰ Berger, 49-75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

of transcendence for building bridges between people of faith and people of no persuasion? This project is undertaken with the conviction that pastors, and local churches, can learn through the art of ethnographic listening and thick description, and that our local church communities can become a presence to those who don't believe in what they are looking for.

Lastly, the goal is to lay semiotic *foundations* that can facilitate the construction of missional practice within a local community that takes seriously the reality that transcendence can be mediated in everyday experience. God is always already present, even in the depths of Sheol.¹² How can missional practice be shaped via everyday theophanic language and where might the church make explicit missiological and theological connections to a generalized sense of transcendent presence? This thesis provides a sense of how these linguistic discoveries can enable missional work between the sacred and the secular, between Nones and the Church.

Limitations / Delimitations

This project is limited to identifying transcendent elements identified by Peter Berger and Edward Farley. It is *not* interested in the ways “God works” in the lives of Nones as a self-confession nor is it interested in reinterpreting specific acts as actual Christian acts. There is no attempt to correlate a particular transcendent signal to a particular element of Christian theology. This is not a study in pantheism, panentheism, pluralism, or otherwise. It is a missiological study driven by sociological method on the nature of signals as a means of discovering how Nones integrate transcendent categories into everyday life. The study further limits itself to the reflexive inferential interview method of James Spradley and assumed Spradley's method a viable one.¹³ It

¹² Psalm 139.8

¹³ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2016).

further limits itself to the reflexive sociological technique of Pierre Bourdieu and makes no attempt to argue for its validity over other research methodologies.¹⁴

As qualitative research, this thesis is limited to describing a data condition and cannot produce a significant data set with only a handful of subjects. Thus, I am limiting my study to Nones who are *not* former Christians, who would *most likely* refuse a minister's presence during any threshold moment in their lives (weddings, birth, deaths, etc.) and who self-identify as non-religious when asked. These will be the three preliminary questions when screening participants. The research was further limited to three participants.

Assumptions

One of the primary assumptions of this thesis is that the historical context proposed by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* is a plausible one. No attempt is made to institute Taylor as a faithful guide; it is assumed throughout. I assume that an inductive approach to theological and sociological research is the most reliable for practical theology and sociological inquiry. Other methods are not used, nor this one justified.

It's assumed Peter Berger and Edward Farley's definitions of signals of transcendence and deep symbols are reliable referents. This thesis does not provide space to argue *for* their position. Consequently, this thesis assumes anthropology a reasonable starting place from which to begin theological inquiry despite the hesitation that might arise from neo-orthodox objections.¹⁵ Therefore, this thesis does *not* assume that a transcendent signal is a signal toward

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu & Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Berger, 50-51.

the God of the Bible. As Berger notes, whatever else these phenomena of transcendence are, they are human projections encasing an indication of a truly “other” of some sort, perhaps the sort that can be appropriated for Christian theology, but perhaps not. Yet they are non-reductionistic and not subject to empirical establishment. They are encased in human history, social constructions, and daily activities.¹⁶

Terms

Transcendence- not a technical philosophical term that refers to God, but a word that refers to rising above/pointing beyond the normal, everyday world. It is an immaterial structuration, a phenomenon, that belongs to everyday experience, not predicated upon empiricism.

Signals- Human gestures, activities, structures, values, or words that point beyond themselves.

Deep Symbols- Words of power, or linguistic constructs, that shape the values of society and guide belief, morality, and action.

Secular- In this thesis, secular has two primary meanings. First, when used to describe people, secular simply means those who do not hold to a religious orientation. Secondly, secular may also refer to that which creates the conditions for disbelief. This last definition gets at the heart of why god, et al., is no longer axiomatic yet traces of transcendence still linger in our western context.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Taylor, 2-3.

Nones- Group of persons who are not former Christians and are not part of an institutional church body. They do not use clerical services at threshold moments. People for whom a particular faith is not an assumption.

Literature Review

A Secular Age. Charles Taylor's work is the cultural narrative upon which this project thesis rests.¹⁸ His work is a sweeping movement of western history that describes how civilization has traversed from a world of enchantment to a world of immanent malaise, a world wherein belief is strained of credibility. This thesis assumes Taylor's narrative a credible description of western civilization and uses it as the historical underpinning in the long march toward making the group known as Nones. The language employed by Taylor is used throughout.

A Rumor of Angels. Peter Berger's work is equally pivotal. At the dawn of what has become known as postmodernism, Berger was ahead of many of his colleagues in urging caution at the premature obituaries being written for religion and the life of faith. The title is self-descriptive, *A Rumor of Angels*: a rumor of those things in our everyday lives that communicate something more, a higher sense of origins living alongside us, with us, more than the purely immanent frames of reference academics would have us believe every modern person must believe.¹⁹ Berger recommends theology start by looking for signals of transcendence, not hidden meanings in people's lives, but elements of everyday life that seem to exhibit a connection to the

¹⁸ Ibid., 1-22 & 147-218.

¹⁹ Berger, 1-27.

supernatural. His signals of order, play, hope, damnation/evil, and humor testify to the transcendent nature of human social organization.

Deep Symbols. Like Berger, Edward Farley proposes deeply embedded anthropological tendencies in human behavior. He presents five deep symbols: tradition, obligation, the real, law and hope.²⁰ These broad categories of everyday existence add non-reductionistic elements to human existence. Further, he introduces the concept of “topical words” with “subwords”: signs used to represent metaphorical domains of semiotic coherence.²¹ Berger and Farley are used here methodologically as the primary means of measuring stories and as taxonomical ciphers.

An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology. Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant’s text serve as methodological principle upon which this thesis resides. The unique contribution of both is their insistence on a reflexive sociology that not only engages the field of their work but cohabitates with their subjects to *build out* a sociological theory.²² Bourdieu argues that the world is not a spectacle to be gazed upon with foreign theories. Rather, the world is to be treated practically and concretely, and from practical observations theories may then be developed. Sociology is reflexive in nature, adapting to the changing field before it, but never retreating from its concrete setting.

Field Work in Theology. Christian Scharen’s text,²³ is important because it offers a theological gateway to the theories of Bourdieu and Wacquant. Scharen demonstrates how a

²⁰ Farley organizes the chapters of his text according to these deep symbols.

²¹ Farley, 1-12.

²² Bourdieu & Wacquant, 36-46.

²³ Christian, Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God’s Work in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016.)

theological practitioner might adapt sociological theories and develop an incarnational ethnographic approach. It is a rough field handbook that guides theological practitioners through the marriage of theory and practice.

The Ethnographic Interview. James Spradley's text models how to do an ethnographic interview. Spradley's work is a trustworthy guide that takes the reader from the beginning stages of the interview process (finding an informant/selecting your sample size, etc.) to asking various types of questions, to beginning to organize the data, and writing an ethnographic account. His text is full of examples that one might use to pattern their own questions relative to their study.²⁴

Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice. Mary Clark Moschella's book has been influential because it places ethnographic technique squarely into the hands of the pastor, and thus, the local church. What was once an academic afterthought has now become a method of listening, presence, learning, recording, organizing, witnessing, and composing. Ethnography becomes a pastoral means of research, the goal of which is re-writing, and co-authoring, with people.²⁵

Biblical & Theological Reflection

The project derived its biblical emphasis from the Psalter and the Book of Acts. Of primary importance is discovering the ways in which scripture witnesses to the reality that God is not held hostage to the primary category of special revelation, nor is the rumor of God located within a specific belief set. Thus, one must consider what biblical texts locate a divine economy

²⁴ Spradley, 78-200.

²⁵ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

that transcends the empirical world and is manifested through creation itself and the intuitions of humanity? Does scripture offer testimony of transcendental markers that, while falling short of absolute creedal confessions, urge one to observe the natural course of the world in such a way that life is not sublimated to the senses, but that the senses give way to a world beyond themselves? For our purposes, two texts are insightful.

Psalm 19. In this peculiar Psalm, we see Israel reflecting the background of its wider ancient near eastern counterparts and testifying to the reality that God is made manifest in creation. This is a creation hymn in which natural theology takes center stage as God is revealed through the routine *arrival* of creation. God is made manifest in the heavens that tell of his glory. The expanse declares the work of his hands and the days even pour fourth language about God! Yet all of this is revealed in the very absence of language! Creation does not need a preacher to declare the presence of transcendent beckoning! Creation witnesses to a transcendental presence whose absence is the eternal recurrence of creation. This text offers a means whereby we receive biblical witness that God is present in creation even when believers are not the ones making that witness present. What might this mean for Nones whose views of the world may be truncated by immanent frames of reference? Where are latent deposits of transcendence in the lives of Nones? As part of the goodness of creation, can human life also disclose this glory? How (where?) *does* heaven and earth connect?

Acts 17.16-33. This is the wonderful passage of Paul teaching/debating Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, as well as Stoic/Epicurean Philosophers of Athens, about a strange new deity: Jesus Christ. In this passage, Paul finds himself in a pluralistic world, not unlike our secular age.²⁶ In

²⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward A Paradigm For Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014). Berger argues that what we really see in culture

this context, one does not find the negation of religion, but the weakening of commitment to any singular mode of belief. In our cultural moment, the consequences are similar: standing beneath the avalanche of uncertainty and doubt that characterizes our moment in history, many are left with religious intimations (like the Athenians) but unsure where to direct their commitment. This scripture testifies that there may be Nones, while not ready to confess a creed, who may feel as if Mars Hill is a part of how they make sense of the world. In what way is the unknown God regulative of the lives of persons in Paul's era and our own?

In addition to biblical frames, there are several theological convictions that support this project. Foremost among these is the conviction that an anthropological contextual model for theology offers a nuanced and responsible way to pursue pastoral ethnography. It holds that human nature, and its social constructs, are holy conduits of divine revelation.²⁷ This conviction is especially relevant to this thesis because it holds that revelation occurs within broader values and relational patterns of human social construction.

Further, this thesis holds to an incarnational theology: the secular and sacred intermingle. History is riddled with the complex relationship between the sacred and the profane.²⁸ The exact relationship of these two remains contested, producing works of strong social critique by scholars who would argue that the secular was never a given, but was a development in history.

is not a move toward secularization but a move toward pluralization. In this way, he also critiques Taylor's narrative.

²⁷ For further extrapolation see Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 56.

²⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), xvi. "The last place most people look [for God] is right under their feet, in the everyday activities...What possible spiritual significance could a trip to the grocery store have?" See also Jennifer M. Hecht, *Doubt: A history* (New York: HarperOne, 2004).

Scholars such as Charles Taylor and John Milbank espouse this view, despite their apparent disagreement on the role, development, and origins of secularity.²⁹ An incarnational theology holds that it is precisely in the mundane of being human that God's revelation is most clearly disclosed.

What is at Stake?

Communication requires a common language. The church cannot communicate with that which it does not understand. Pastoral research must demonstrate that transcendent values are not absent from the lives of people that identify as Nones. It needs to be demonstrated to faith communities that Nones share similar values and order their life in ways not dissimilar from those in the church. Therefore, this study aims to identify transcendent phenomena as a means of providing a foundation that would allow later missiological connection with secular, non-religious, persons. There are missional bridges to be built and missional languages to be developed and correlated to the sacramental life of the church. As people bound to cultures, and language, we embody signals that cannot be reduced to our senses, nor are they afforded simple explanation. The presence of these signals act as witnesses that invite us to participate in something bigger than ourselves. If we are always already united in forms of life, perhaps we may move past being divided by doctrine and embrace a missiological imperative that extends beyond rote proselytization and includes communing with others in spaces where traces of transcendence are present.

²⁹ John Milbank, "A Closer Walk on the Wild Side," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Johnathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 55-81.

Significance for Self

My personal call to ministry has gradually drawn me to the boundaries of human experience: belief and doubt, faith and reason, hope and tragedy, church and academy, theists and atheists. I am called to occupy this unique space, functioning as a bridge between the two, occupying a place Tillich describes as existence on “the boundary.”³⁰ This project allowed me to ethnographically describe Nones and learn from them. I wanted to know what values they hold dear, how they make sense of life, and *what transcendent categories provide narrative framework* for their lives. Doing so allowed me to discover the ways in which this group of people are seeking (even living according to) the very thing they do not confess. I have a calling to seek hermeneutical bridges between the structural worlds of Nones and Believers, convinced that future missiological imperatives must negotiate this relationship. Listening is the foundation for any relationship. The execution of this study demonstrates to Nones that there are Christians who not only want to listen to them, but desire to learn from them, sharing difficult stories and exploring our deepest human needs.

Significance for Ministry Context

Rural Christian contexts withstanding, I am unaware of many contexts in which the rise of Nones should not be a concern for the mission of the local church. At this point, many churches have felt, or will feel, the demographic impact of the rise of Nones. The church’s *raison d’etre* is the proclamation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. This message is relevant to all people, even those who may not find its *particularity* relevant. This study is a missional activity of the church without intent to proselytize. The intent is to engage conversation with

³⁰ Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966).

Nones to understand their language, live with them, and as far as possible, befriend them. This research provides resources for *creating* missiological empathy within local congregations as a means of demonstrating where vestiges of transcendence are present in Nones conveniently. The language and signal set that resulted from this research provides a means of missiological correlation between the sacramental life of the local church and the sacramental ordering of everyday life by non-religious persons.

Significance for the Wider Church

Foremost, this study discovers a common symbolic language between Nones and persons of faith. It is often assumed that people outside the church are not religious, or that God is “far from them.” From an anthropological perspective, the wider church benefits from a greater appreciation of the way in which all people embody elements of transcendence in their daily lives. We are more alike than we are different. Rather than looking for God through special revelation, it enhances the missional efforts of the church to demonstrate that God need not be found in ecstatic religious experience alone, but that God is most often, and most widely revealed, in the ordinary things we do as people.³¹ The phenomena of life is the spillway of transcendence. If the church can make these connections, the church can theorize local missional activity using these common embodiments and work to correlate areas of transcendence in Nones within its liturgy and its own sense of making disciples. As Tertullian famously quipped over a millennia ago, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” This rhetorical question is as pressing now as it was then.

³¹ Brown Taylor, 1-51.

Project Methodology

Following an anthropologically contextualized model,³² this project seeks out transcendental signals in the life of persons who a.) identity as non-religious/Nones and b.) are not former Christians and c.) would most likely refuse a minister at threshold moments of life. This study engaged people who are secular and for whom a creedal faith was not a default position. It did not engage those who had once left churches, but instead, sought out participants that always looked at religion with suspicion and not an epistemological option given their cultural influences.³³ Three participants were chosen, along with two alternates, for four, one-hour interview sessions, following James Spradley's ethnographic interview techniques. Interviews began with grand tour questions and followed with mini-tour questions.³⁴ Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom or FaceTime. Questions were predetermined by the researcher, and based on responses, the researcher followed with situationally sensitive, descriptive, structural, and contrast questions to help guide the interview process.³⁵

Participants were selected by two primary means following the principles of purposive and maximum variation sampling.³⁶ First, under the conviction of the priesthood of all believers, the researcher worked in conjunction with pastoral and lay persons in his local parish

³² Bevens, 54-69.

³³ Taylor, 3.

³⁴ Spradley, 86. See also Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁶ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 83-84.

community, via a double-blind selection process, to locate subjects who met the above criteria and were willing to share their stories. Potential participants were contacted by third party persons in the parish and asked if they would like to participate in a doctoral research project that desires to understand their worldview. They were informed that someone was interested in hearing their story, their beliefs, and invited to participate. If they agreed, the 3rd party attained contact information and the researcher contacted the potential participant to arrange an entrance interview. Thereafter, a date and time was scheduled to commence interviews.

The second primary means of selecting candidates was via snowball sampling. Linear or discriminative sampling was also used.³⁷ Snowball and chain sampling is the process whereby informants can give the interviewer leads on whom to interview next.³⁸ Via the double-blind solicitation process above, the researcher located multiple participants and asked if they knew anyone who might be interested in participating in this study.

Participants were protected during this study the following ways. First, in double-blind selection they were told of the project and given opportunity to volunteer. Secondly, via snowball sampling, there were no negative consequences for not participating in the study or providing referrals. Thirdly, all participants were granted anonymity for the purposes of the study. Fourthly, all participants signed a consent form in which they agree to be recorded via voice memo and the researcher agreed to delete all recordings when the research was complete. Lastly, the participants were given the choice to leave the study at any time.

³⁷ <https://research-methodology.net/sampling-in-primary-data-collection/snowball-sampling/>. Accessed 4/1/2019.

³⁸ Sensing, 83.

Resources required for the interview primarily included a computer or smart phone. Paper and pencil were used to record field notes as well as a computer being used for transcription. The researcher used an audio recording device on one occasion, and after transcribing the data, deleted the recording. Post interview analytic memos were used to process and organize interview data.³⁹ Coding and taxonomies were constructed within my private transcriptions via Berger, Farley, and Saldana's paradigms.

Methodological Rational

This project achieves three goals. First, it locates in the lives of non-religious persons transcendental signals as specified, or relative to, the anthropological paradigms of Peter Berger and Edward Farley. For this reason, the initial coding and taxonomy to be produced is predicated on their symbolic registers. These broad categories also provide the code and taxonomical presentations of the thesis.

The projects three criteria of participation are predicated on the secular narrative of Charles Taylor. The study is interested in self-identified Nones and not the evaluation of anyone else. It is interested in Nones that are not former Christians as its presumed former Christians would have expected symbolic baggage. The narrative Charles Taylor presents is one in which there is a secular person for whom faith was simply never a *given*, even in the South. It is this sort of secular person this study engaged. The final criteria establishes that participants are secular in orientation when it comes to pivotal moments in their lives. Hence, the method of interview questioning and participant solicitation both meet the first goal.

³⁹ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 50-55.

Secondly, the project demonstrates to the church that Nones are not trapped in immanent frames of references, but that their intuitions of tradition, hope, and other signals are intimations of a non-reducible reality, of transcendence. All transcendence points beyond the immediacy of human experience. This is established by presenting the findings of the study with a focus on the value sets communicated by study participants.

Lastly, by locating signals of transcendence in Nones, this study lays the *semiotic foundations* for missional activity between the church and the burgeoning demographic of the none-religious.⁴⁰ For this reason, the researcher engaged people of the parish in soliciting participants. In so doing, the local church laid the groundwork for future missional communication and gospel correlation. Attending to the symbolic world of Nones, the researcher asked questions that allowed transcendent phenomena to be disclosed. Following this method, the project demonstrates that this thesis is a missiological study employing ethnographic sociology, grounded in anthropological method, and engaging the corporate body of the local church. Thereby, all three primary goals have methodological justification.

Plan for Evaluation

The data was measured by the semiotic code offered within the sociological frameworks of Peter Berger and Edward Farley. Specifically, their registers provided the analytic markers through which the research findings were organized. Through the interview process, participants responses were transcribed, and field notes made. Frequently used signals were notated and coded for congruence and incongruence across participant responses. The coding took linguistic

⁴⁰ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 30th anniv. ed (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 88-98.

form and was developed into an intensified taxonomy for mapping purposes. Exact coding procedures were determined during data analysis and contingent on which method most clearly mapped, and presented, the findings.⁴¹ As a matter of criterion and evaluation, a four-question entrance survey provided necessary discrimination to isolate the noted participant group. A five question exit survey was given to all participants to gauge their experience in the research and the viability of similar methods in the future.

This thesis is about listening to the life of Nones. In so listening, the study located operative signals of transcendence and deep symbols. As these were revealed in their stories, the researcher was able to demonstrate that more than pure immanence is at work. By this process, the thesis demonstrates and evaluates the ways in which the lives of Nones (at least this qualitative data set) are expansively transcendent even though not specifically creedal. Consequently, the semiotic disclosure provided in the evaluation, and collation of data, provide a practical foundation from which a missional language can be constructed between religious groups and none-religious persons, shared valued sets providing substantive relational bridges.

Final Assessment

The findings of this study will be shared with my local Parish vestry and ministerial colleagues at the appropriate time, including the Diocese of East Tennessee. Further, it will be presented to the local church as a means of laying the foundations for missiological bridges between Nones in an effort to help them understand the ideological context in which they now do mission and evangelism. I have also been invited to share these findings in a few other Christian

⁴¹ Saldana, 119-123 & 181-186. The code used in this thesis is Concept Coding supported by a narrower version of Taxonomic Domain Coding. See Chapter 4 of this thesis and Appendix F.

churches. A final report of its findings has been presented to participants as an appreciation for their contributions in helping the church better understand their values and worldviews.

This project provided lasting influence personally due to the ways it shaped and developed the skill sets of this novice ethnographic pastoral theologian. Ethnography, as a discipline, embraces an incarnational model of ministry in which the pastor lives with people and seeks to understand them from within their own habitus. God is already at work in the lives of others; contextualized anthropological ethnography has taught me to be attuned to God there, and perhaps, mediate persons toward the idea they don't believe in.

This project is of importance to all ministers concerned about the mission of the church because it engages Nones from a sociological, linguistic, ethnographic, and therefore, missional perspective. This study is immediately applicable to the local, and wider church, because it provides new parameters within which churches may learn to communicate with, and engage, those who do not share their theological convictions. It is my intent to develop this thesis beyond the scope of this project and provide a text for pastors and churches that can use these findings as a means of understanding the non-religious in our communities and generating liturgical and linguistic bridges through which mission can take place. Many churches, denominations, and religious leaders are brainstorming how to reach this new segment of people who do not identify with any religion. Few are finding answers. Few are intentionally listening. An incarnational approach to theology is not a guarantee that the institutional church will “win” Nones to their creed; it might not “work” in the traditional way of counting numbers on a church roll. However, it will be faithfully Christocentric because it will allow the church to enter the human condition and see redemption where many only see difference.

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFTS: CHARLES TAYLOR AS TOUR GUIDE

This chapter will explore the philosophical underpinnings that have brought us to this historical trajectory, ranging from the history of ideas to establishing a context and method from which to view this project and its context. It will then provide two biblical examples that ground this study, that provide justification for its importance and newer frameworks from which to think about our contemporary context and engage it. In the final section, it will explore the theological approaches that frame this project. In theological method there is a rationale from which it proceeds, a construct of conception, that provide coordinates for thinking. Together, these act as epistemic guides for understanding the other, allowing scripture to guide us, and developing a missiology predicated on a theology that engages human experience.

Leaving the Past

Trying to write the end of an epoch, and forge of a new one, is difficult enough, but attempting to do so via the history of ideas (through an existential sense of things) even more difficult.⁴² Taylor reminds us like all “striking human achievements, there is something in it which resists reduction” to various enabling conditions.⁴³ If only the move from the “higher time” to secular dominance were as chronological as the complex shifts through which it transpired. Nevertheless, one can paint sweeping descriptions whereby the world that was

⁴² I am aware of the critiques of Taylors narrative method, conjectural philosophical history, that flourished in the middle 18th century. For a more detailed analysis see, Johnathan Sheehan, “When Was Disenchantment,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Johnathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2010), 217-242.

⁴³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 258.

described in chapter 1 of this thesis *Introduction*⁴⁴ could break into the present with shattering force.

To go from where we were, to where we *are*, Taylor suggests three bulwarks of belief had to first be removed for secular humanism and materialism to be imaginable. These are as follows:

1. The natural world had its place in a cosmos that testified to divine purpose and action. The world was porous, and the heavens and earth intermingled with divine direction via great events in the natural order.
2. God was implicated in the ordering of society. A kingdom or politic can only be conceived as grounded in something greater than itself.
3. People lived in an “enchanted” world in the sense that there were moral forces at work around us, be they demons, angels, or direct providence.⁴⁵

These three bulwarks of belief had to be moved, dispelled, or called into question for anything like humanism to take root and produce secular space. These things held as plausible do not guarantee that everyone once believed in the God of the Bible, but it does mean that a world where this is the default worldview makes an idea like atheism, agnosticism, or humanism a foreign imaginary, basically incomprehensible for most.

These bulwarks follow closely to what Taylor later describes as the great “disembedding.” This is a term he uses to discuss the shift from society as communitarian in nature to a collection of individual agents, the former being primary in an enchanted world. For

⁴⁴ See Chapter 3 in this thesis.

⁴⁵ Taylor, 25-26.

secular humanism to take root, the above had to be negated one by one: God is removed from the cosmos, thereby society is removed from being patterned after a divine kingdom, thereby humans are not children who share a common a destiny but individual agents guiding their lives to material ends patterned after their own shifting economic desires.⁴⁶ In other words, these things were disembedded, one by one, gradually.

But how does that happen? Taylor locates the hinge, or fissure, within deism. These intersectional concepts are slowly eroded as providential deism moves from an idea held by elites to one held more generally, thus inscribing a secular imaginary for an entire people. Firstly, deism holds that the world is designed by God. However, in something Taylor calls providential deism, it takes an anthropological turn, and the meaning of life takes on immanent referents. Concepts like human freedom, a redefinition of belief, the *re-ordering* of society via rationality, are grounded within immanent frames and recast in humanist terms. In theological terms, one can say that deism deconstructs eschatology. It shifts the locus of destination from “*out there*” to “*right here*.”

Secondly, deism, contributes to a major shift in an understanding of God. There is a shift away from believing God is guiding history, as is the case in the Bible, and a move toward an impersonal order in which God is the architect of the universe, establishing physical laws whereby humanity must live, but not engaging with creation in any meaningful way other than giving the gift of creation and the gift of creaturely pursuits within it (Newton’s God, Adam Smith’s Jesus, so to speak). This post-Galilean/Newtonian conception of laws excludes meaning found in objects or sacred spaces. It is a natural progression to move from impersonal order,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 146-152, 176-181.

impersonal God, to immanent frames of meaning, to humanism and secularity. The move has gone from one of incarnational God, to one of excarnational embodiments.

Thirdly, deism espouses an idea of true religion that is consistent with the impersonal order of the laws of nature. It is the task of humans to clear once again the path to real religion. Creation itself, apart from special revelation, reveals all that is needed to be known, or can be known, about God. Reason alone can be used to understand God and the laws of creation and anything that cannot be thus understood, such as miracles or access to the “will of God,” are enthusiasms which cannot exist in this emerging imaginary.⁴⁷

This gradual slide of theism, into deism, and it’s resultant humanism (what’s left?) in the history of ideas will result in what Taylor calls an *Immanent Frame*, a philosophical constitution that frames an everyday life buffered from transcendent categories of meaning, grounded in instrumental rationality, and becoming pervasively secular.⁴⁸ This is the frame in which we now find ourselves; it’s the frame within which the portraits of our lives exist and we can imagine no other, and if we do, it is an imagination necessarily tainted with doubt.

Protestantism as Handmaiden of the Secular

Another “cause” of secularity’s arrival that needs passing mention is the influence the Protestant Reformation played as midwife of secularity, as it aided and abetted the means whereby the earlier bulwarks of belief could be chipped away. Taylor does not limit Reform to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 292-293.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 542.

just the Protestant Reformation but does make it the pivotal culprit of the Reform movements⁴⁹ due to its influence on the ordering of society (politics) and the way it provided a hinge for humanisms eventual arrival.

At the heart of Reform is a sense (ironically available through reason) of God's ideal, a perfection not attained in the old order. Reform occurs because something in the present order is understood insufficient, at odds with how things *should* be. Reform seeks to close the gap between the ideal and real characterizations of eternal and creaturely life.⁵⁰ In this sense, the Protestant Reformation was a harbinger of the secular in that it, first, disenchanting the world of the prescribed liturgical (enchanted?) order by discarding any means of salvation that can be controlled by humans. For example, John Calvin, chief among Reformers, taught that humans are totally depraved and, therefore, cannot mechanistically engage the divine via "works" such as sacraments. To think salvation could be imparted via human action with objects is blasphemous. Humans cannot dispense salvation at whim. The distinction between the sacred and profane now breaks down and all of life, the mundane and the once sacred, is dependent on God's action alone. Disenchantment begins by draining the sacraments (objects) of salvific power, albeit predicated on the shift to God's power in saving humanity.⁵¹ There is no magic left in the old world. The "red carpet" has been rolled out for the advent of naturalism.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35-40. Smith notes that Taylor augments his wider criticism with movements of Reform in general, though the Protestant Reformation certainly is as an effective cause, usurping accepted structures of belief.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁵¹ Ibid., 79.

Secondly, the Protestant Reformation aided in bringing about humanism because of its need to order society. Having disenchanted (desacramentalized) practices, the Reformers sought to imagine meaning/salvation in the daily routines of ordinary citizens. The body politic had to be ordered in such a way as to endow it with meaning, with laws and codes that provided boundaries whereby citizens knew that their entire existence was the realm of God's action. The holy was no longer relegated to vocations, but was now scaled to all of society, which meant abolishing renunciative vocations and building renunciation into ordinary life as a means of sanctifying everyone.⁵² This, in turn, placed a greater emphasis on the interiority of spiritual life, wedding it to a well-ordered society and scaling moral obligations. The move to individuation and personal agency as integral to human identity now has no barriers or obstacles to humanism are moved ever so slightly.⁵³

Secularism or Pluralism?

In his *Many Altars of Modernity*, Peter Berger bluntly states that Taylor's description is ill conceived. He notes,

“Taylor's *A Secular Age* provides a detailed picture of the secular discourse or “immanent frame” that has become very important in the modern world. However, the title of the book is misleading. The phrase “Secular Age” hardly describes the state of affairs...our age would be best described as pluralist rather than secular.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 83.

⁵³ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: Chicago, 2007), 62-66 & 43-83. Luther's theology led to the emergence of the modern sense of self and is a precursor to personal subjectivity gone awry. Taylor makes a concentrated effort in his text to place the collapse of transcendence at the feet of the Reformation. So much so that his chapter on the Reformation period is titled “Protestant Revolution” and not “Reformation.”

⁵⁴ Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 73.

Berger argues that the resultant age of the transitions Taylor describes are more vulgar than romantic, political, and economic interests being the stuff of history that shapes the flow of ideas. As the geopolitical and economic interests of different ages shaped the world, so too did it shape ideas and shrink the world. Berger defines the resultant pluralism as “a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.”⁵⁵ This definition of pluralism matters because it doesn’t necessarily negate Taylor’s secular as much as it *amends* it. What Berger is describing is the social situation of a non-monolithic world, shrunk by globalization, and secured by political interests, not resorting to violence. This is a world of integration and shared life.

Thus, Berger offers a history of his own, describing how the emergence of modern cities, to global trade, to the industrial revolution, all secured by modern state commitments to inclusivity, provided persons with more choice and options than ever before.⁵⁶ It was only a matter of time before civic and personal life rubbed against one another to cause enough friction to lead to what Taylor describes as a world of disenchantment. Berger doesn’t disagree with Taylor’s typology at this point. He notes that “Pluralism relativizes and undermines many of the *certainties* [my italics] by which humans used to live,” (the magic dies) and society has indeed become a buffered one, “Another way of putting this is that Christianity in the Global South is more overtly supernaturalist, while the faith in the North has made many more concessions to modern naturalism.”⁵⁷ He even seems to agree that the conditions of belief, grounded in

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶ Graham Ward, “Embedding Theology,” *Colloquium* 47:1 (2015): 14-25. Ward also notes the role of the secular state in constructing political equality via procedural secularism.

⁵⁷ Berger, 8 & 23. See also Newbegin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 21-41.

sociological shifts, has resulted in what Taylor describes: modern believers live in a world where they tend equally to faith and secularity.⁵⁸ We play two interwoven language games.

Since Taylor's narrative is grounded in the European history of ideas and beliefs it would be difficult to imagine his thesis carrying much weight in the Horn of Africa or in the Brazilian Amazon. The latter, however, is not our context. Our context is that which has been bequeathed to use via the philosophical and political thought world of the West. Berger is correct that the world is as religious as ever. Multiple statistics can demonstrate the power of religious movements in the global South and in Asia, not to mention the emergence of experiential expressivist forms of faith taking root in Western, presumably secular, culture.⁵⁹ In fact, many notable scholars are now arguing that not only has the secularization theory of culture been disproved, but culture has shifted from enchanted, to disenchanting, to re-enchantment. Graham Ward, for example, argues that culture is being informed emotionally and imaginatively by the culture of re-enchantment, and as a result, theology should be about the process of embedding itself once again rather than surrendering to the totalitarian narrative of secular influence.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁹ Ward, 20. Ward notes the revival of Pentecostalism, "people today want to experience and experience themselves experiencing." Regarding the deep religiosity of the Southern hemisphere, this pew research finding is poignant. The projected population of Africa in 2050 is 1.9 billion and Christians are projected to comprise 1.1 billion of those people. Even the Muslim population is projected to be 670 million in 2050, both religions growing by 30% to 50%. See "The Future of World Religions Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," *Pew Research*, 4/2/2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/sub-saharan-africa/>, (accessed 5/5/2021).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 22. With convincing passion he implores his reader, "Well beyond genre and method there have to be new theological styles as theologians learn to write and speak as if their lives depended upon it."

It is certainly the case that the world is as religious as ever, yet it is also as secular as ever. The two are not mutually exclusive. Context matters and theologies constructed locally will be even more important in the future as one can no longer assume cultural frames of meaning even among a shared geography. Given the way in which much of what Berger writes has shades of Taylor, and much of what Taylor writes is not inconsistent with pluralism (such as his ideas of cross pressures and nova effects)⁶¹, the theologian would do well to consider these perspectives as both/and rather than either/or. Because the world is secular, it can be more plural; Because it is plural, it can be more secular. At final analysis, these are two sides of the same coin of history.⁶²

Taylor's Game, Bourdieu's Field

Hegel describes history as a teleological movement of the spirit toward fuller expressions of reason, the positing of itself in space and time as history moves toward its fulfillment. Such expressions take place in community, as locations of history. Taylor views history with this Hegelian lens: as a succession of stages through which ideas are shaped and civilization slowly changes. His goal is to tell this story while marking these transitions, socially and ideologically.⁶³

It is one thing to feel as Taylor does, to agree with his *sense* of things; it is quite another to make sense of these feelings and interpret meaning from out of this disenchanted context. Taylor has presented us with the game, the frame, within which our modern context may be

⁶¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 299-313 & 595-617.

⁶² From the field of missiology, Leslie Newbegin also made a concerted effort to interface mission with pluralism *and* secularity. See his seminal text, Leslie Newbegin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁶³ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 389-392.

interpreted, but a game would not be complete without having a concept of its field of play and its players. What is needed is a theory of sociology grounded in empirical and participatory observation to unravel the relationships observed, the language used, and the actions produced to understand the elements within the frame. Contrary to the inclination of sociology to “observe language from the standpoint of the listening subject rather than that of the speaking subject,”⁶⁴ one needs a concept of sociology that frames its findings from out of the frame in which subjects exist.⁶⁵

In his early work on method, Pierre Bourdieu articulated his commitment to fieldwork⁶⁶ noting his return to the sources of knowledge: the study of social relations as a means of understanding a culture and society.⁶⁷ What he wanted to avoid was the privileged position of the observer that takes up a “point of view” on its subject and transfers onto the subject his own sense of relationship to it, as if what the subject being studied was doing was an act of executing an ideal rather than constructing a language or world via its fluid *actions*. He notes, “With Marx... *Theses on Fierbach*, the theory of practice as practice insists, against positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are *constructed*...that the principle of this

⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1977), 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-22.

⁶⁶ Fieldwork is the process of engaging/studying a subject within their native environment. This is different than sociology that either a) does not use fieldwork or b) hoists foreign, rigid paradigms, upon its subject to understand its subject, the study being a view of the researcher rather than that which is observed.

⁶⁷ Scharen, 19.

construction is *practical* activity⁶⁸ oriented towards practical functions.”⁶⁹ He goes on to further explain that practices imply cognition, that they are linguistically constructive, and via practical functions organize perception (i.e., plausibility structures) and structure future practice (acceptable behavior in one’s world). As a result, it is better to say that a person *has* a world, rather than that they live *in* the world. The world in which a person, or people, reside, is the result of constructed social realities produced by this complex history; it is neither stagnant nor ideal. To better understand how worlds are constructed in context, Bourdieu develops two important concepts: *habitus* and *field*, both of which were developed from the confluence of theory, method, and research.⁷⁰

The concept of *habitus* was developed from out of the contradictions that Bourdieu discovered when he attempted to employ structuralist method to his own research. What he discovered was that no number of rules or models produced via structuralist anthropology could envelope the totality of human practice. He needed a theory that could account for the logic *within* the practice, the inner workings of which are known only to its participants, but which may also be opaque to its possessors.⁷¹ Habitus is his concept that attempts to describe this logic from *within*.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Hegel*, 389-427.

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 96.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-87.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

Bourdieu defines *habitus* as a system of dispositions giving participants a feel for the game and enabling an infinite number of moves within the bounds of the game.⁷² People do not live by rules as much as they live within a frame of acceptable action, one that is defined and known by them but often not decided by them in the moment of their action (though action can produce new decisions and newer available actions at a future date). Habitus literally refers to the embodied sense of appropriate perception and action *within* an *agent*, “the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations... a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks”⁷³ into which they are born.

A close corollary of habitus is *field*. Field is a concept used to name a specific place of society, a domain with special rules and goals (i.e. *Taylor’s Secular Age*). Christian Scharen uses a soccer field as an example of Bourdieu’s concept. The *field* has tools, boundaries, objects of play, referees, goals, and time limits. All these things limit and make possible an infinite number of plays, an infinite number of actions and results. The field is a way of providing *structure*, but it is not a stagnant taxonomy. It is the stage upon which the players play, but the habitus is the *innate* possibility *within* players to act and construct new ways of playing the game. The game is an active improvisation/construction. It is lived in contemporary *fields* of contention within which participants move according to their own collective, and individuating, *habitus*.⁷⁴ Thus, these two concepts function fully only in relationship to one another and only have sense as

⁷² Scharen, 76.

⁷³ Bourdieu & Wacquant, 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

concepts that understand social reality to be a space of play in which language, ideas, and actions take on new forms as they interact with one another producing an expansion of themselves in *practice*. Thus, there is no structure other than post-structural possibilities.

In summation, Taylor's Game (the long trek of the history of ideas culminating in humanism), has embedded a particular habitus into participants of western culture. We now play on a secular and pluralistic field, these are the approved "takes" or "givens" of Bourdieu's field so to speak, in which the game has changed from that of our ancestors just a few centuries ago. The immanent frame in which many now operate is the result of disenchanting the world and humanizing it, via the Enlightenment and Renaissance periods, a positivist approach to reason, the displacement of God via deism, and the Protestant Reformation to name a few. Pierre Bourdieu helps one get to the inner workings of embodied ideas from those who live in, *inhabit*, this new frame. His approach not only provides a means of interpretation without infringing on the subject, but also provides way into the recesses of the logic of practice that might help construct semiotic bridges across various pictures / frames.⁷⁵

Biblical Frames: The Psalter and Acts of the Apostles

Divine Whispers

These biblical texts are holy reminders of what can occur if we approach our world and culture with an eye toward observation and an ear toward learning before engaging in anything that can be called missional. The Bible is full of texts that are not so measured, of acts committed

⁷⁵ Schreiter, 59-61. Schreiter's work dovetails nicely with Bourdieu, especially his insistence that in anthropological analysis one is not only concerned with sign systems in a culture, but the "relations among signs given in the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic rules," which allows for the fluidity that Bourdieu notes as developing from out of, and within, cultural practices.

by extremists, and of proverbs and verses used to bludgeon ideological opponents all in the name of preaching the gospel or speaking truth. But these texts take a different approach. In each text we see an author behind them that chose their words carefully because they listened to their world; They knew where they were speaking. They knew what they were speaking *into*. It is impossible to do this if we do not listen, as one of my own teachers would be apt to say, “how will they hear if we do not listen?”⁷⁶ These texts demonstrate an acute awareness of the world around them, and then, offer examples of how to build semantic bridges across frames of reference that are shared, even if *seemingly* teleologically incongruent. These texts show us that God is to be seen, and understood, *in* our world, *in* our cultures, and that our *habitus* is a medium that must be engaged if we so choose to engage with others. Mission starts with listening. Following these biblical texts, the act of ethnography is to write in such a way that our praying becomes *palpable*.

Psalm 19: Creation as Holy Intimation

“What is of enduring and vital significance to the Psalms is that they do testify to the character and activity of the Lord...As such, the Psalms are not simply texts about the past. They are promises for the future.”⁷⁷

Psalm 19 is a creation psalm, the second hymn of praise in the Psalter to this point, only preceded by Psalm 8, and composed of three parts that come as a whole unit in its canonical form.⁷⁸ The Psalm refuses to be harnessed by a single archetype, but it’s placement in Book One

⁷⁶ Ron Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994).

⁷⁷ Nancy-deClaire Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, & Beth L. Tanner, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013), 45.

⁷⁸ Nancy-deClaire Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 70-71. De-Clairie Walford notes that many scholars categorize this as a Torah Psalm, but that the modern reader is accurate to read it as a creation Psalm given that the contents are clearly a song about creation. Modern typologies are not always the best hermeneutical categories.

of the Psalter with the Royals Psalms, as well as its content, makes it most like a hymn and perhaps even of use within the court of the king.⁷⁹ The Psalm immediately arrests the imagination of the reader / hearer, opening with a poetic comparison and directs one's attention to the general revelation of divine majesty that is apparent in an observation of the heavenly bodies.⁸⁰ The Psalmist writes,

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” (19.1-2)

As the reader moves through the Psalm into the second half, it *feels* as if the Psalmist makes a hard pivot, as the Psalmist directs one's attention away from the testimonial power of nature, specifically the heavens and the sun, to the Torah.⁸¹ In 19.4b-6, the Psalmist is completing his poetic description of the stage YHWH sets for the sun, when suddenly, there is a break in the praise unit into an offering of praise for the law of the Lord in 19.7,

In them [the acts/voice of creation] he has set a tent for the sun
Which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber
And like a strong man, runs its course with joy
Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them
And there is nothing hidden from its heat
[Break] The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making the wise simple

⁷⁹ Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, 27-30.

⁸⁰ David Thompson, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Psalms 1-72* (Kansas City: MO: Beacon Hill, 2015), 123-128.

⁸¹ Benjamin D. Sommer, “Nature, Revelation, and Grace in Psalm 19: Towards a Theological Reading of Scripture,” *Harvard Theological Review* 108 no 3 (2015): 379-380. In this context, Torah should be understood fluidly, as it may connote the literal Law of Moses or the instruction of the Lord as part of Hebrew *habitus*.

Many commentators have suggested the Psalm is an example of two different traditions being merged early in its literary history. This is not implausible, but also not necessary. While it is difficult to see past this sudden shift, I propose a few broader theological questions to guide us through its current canonical form. Why *did* the final editor/redactor of the Psalter *choose* to leave three seeming disparate traditions together? Are there, in fact, three different traditions at work in this text or does the Psalmist possess a more metropolitan theology than we give him credit? The Psalm is surprisingly more coherent, more creative, and more engaging of culture, than many readers presume.

It should immediately be noted that the Psalmist sets the agenda for this Psalm in *nature*. As one moves through the Psalm into its different parts, the theme of *revelation* continues throughout. The Psalm never deviates from this theme.⁸² The theme does, however, intensify and narrow to more specific examples of revelatory disclosure, but it nonetheless is primarily concerned with praising God for the means whereby God is known. The Psalm is a magisterial example of intensification in this regard. Note the intensifying of its imagery is related to its further materialization and human *experience*.

1. The heavens proclaim God's glory (*experience as distant observation*)
2. The sky proclaims God's handiwork (*experience as atmosphere/environment*)
3. Day to day pours out speech (*experience as connection to earth proper/lived reality*)
4. Night to Night reveals knowledge (*experience as rhythms of time for humanity*)
5. Every person feels these realities/hears them (*experience as cycles of heavens and days*)
6. The sun is a *part* of this creation by God (*experience as feeling its heat and its faithfulness in its work*)
7. The Law is perfect (*experience of the law as revealing God in text/teaching*)
8. Specific Precepts are right (*revelation as broad law, to exact teachings*)

⁸² Walter Brueggemann, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2014), 101. Others have made a strong case that *speech* is the main theme. See DeClaissé-Walford, *Commentary*, 206.

9. Commandment of the Lord (*revelation* of God via proper religio-ethical framework)
10. The Fear of the Lord is pure (one who does not respect God does not *experience* the revelation of the Law)
11. Rules of the Lord are true (minutiae of lived life as *revelation* of God's character in the life of the community and individuals).
12. The Law, commandment, and rules are daily warnings/guidance (*revelation* of God via obedience)
13. Finally, all of the above takes form in the worship of the individual (from King to people)

Thus, the theme of *revelation* permeates the Psalm, with special attention to modes of divine disclosure grounded in human apprehension. It moves from revelation via nature, to revelation via the law, to the embodiment of both in worship.⁸³ Nature and Law are not competing modes of revelation, as if one appeals to Hebrew Bible enthusiasts of natural law/general revelation and the other to those of special revelation via the Sinai event. According to Psalm 19, both modes of revelation complement one another, though one clearly cannot sacrifice the role natural theology plays in this Psalm.⁸⁴ This Psalm offers a bold testimonial that *witness* for *revelation* has its genesis from below, even as it narrows into a particular divine expression.

The Psalmist's brilliance is further demonstrated with the introduction of the "Sun," providing an important motif for the Psalm.⁸⁵ In ancient near eastern religiosity, the sun was a divine figure. The Psalmist starts with a natural revelation and then moves to specific siphons of

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Sommer, 390-399, for an excellent biblical and theological engagement with Barth on this accord.

⁸⁵ Thompson, 124-126. When modern readers encounter the language of "sun" in the Old Testament, they should not allow their current scientific understanding of the Sun to influence too much of their interpretive processes. Sun, in this context, is pre-scientific revolution. Many readers would have clearly understood the Sun was worshiped, adored, and considered divine, possessing qualities of wisdom and justice. Note the parallels as this Psalm continues.

knowledge that were ascribed to the Sun (*shemesh*).⁸⁶ Indeed, the very language used in the Psalm is practically a verbatim reference to the Sun personified as a god in extant religions. Note the striking parallels in 19.5 alone. The Psalmist notes the Sun is a “strong” man who goes out. A Sumerian hymn calls the sun “the hero who goes out.” The Hebrew word here translated “strong man” can also be translated “hero.” Another hymn of Sumerian Akkadian origins refers to the Sun as one who “enters the bed chambers of his wife” and he is often called the “bridegroom”. These brief mentions establish for our purposes that engaging with ANE ideas of the Sun was a specific goal of this Psalm.⁸⁷

As the Psalm continues the contrast is stark between Shemesh and YHWH.⁸⁸ The language shifts to the *Lord* (YHWH from “El”) in verse 8 and the God of Israel usurps the role of *Shemesh*, particularly as regards justice. The idea of Shemesh as God of justice provides the play on words offered by the Psalmist with the use of *hammato*. The word can be translated both “heat” and “wrath,” the implication being that the penetrating gaze and impact of the Sun on all of life is not grounded in the Sun, but in YHWH.⁸⁹ If there is any question to *what nature* points,

⁸⁶ Sommer, 382-385.

⁸⁷ DeClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, 208. Also, Thompson, 125.

⁸⁸ Karel Van Der Toorn, “Sun,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Anchor, 1992), 237-239. Van Der Toorn notes, “Considering the popularity of the solar cult in the ANE, its absence among Israelites would be astonishing,” but also, “although the God of Israel never came to be regarded as being immanent in the sun, he did take over the role of sun god.”

⁸⁹ DeClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, 209.

the Psalmist wants to be clear it does not point to the Sun as a/the god; it directs one's attention to YHWH.⁹⁰

Psalm 19 functions on multiple levels. First, it acts to establish that revelation can begin from creation and move upward. Not all revelation is Christocentric, but all revelation *is* theocentric. There is a general revelation that beckons to the human experience in the acts and speechless words of creation, drawing from people a yearning they *feel* but cannot speak, even as they hear it in words they've never understood. Again, the Psalmist says, "Day to day pours forth speech...there is no speech, there are no words, neither is their voice heard." (19.2-3).

Secondly, even as revelation can be general in orientation, generality always leads to embodiment, and embodiment to disclosure. The Psalm intensifies as it narrows, from heavens, to sun, to *Torah*, to worship experience. Each intensification discloses a closer glimpse of God and God's *character*. As human's sense, *feel*, or see what the Psalmist describes, they are moved to *do*. In *doing*, even if it is their own crafting, their *being* becomes a form of understanding, a revelation from *out of* an experience.

Lastly, this Psalm is theology at the intersection of the people of God and world (i.e., church and culture). The Psalm intentionally engages the thought world, or *habitus*, of its people. It is aware of the field of images that can be deployed and partners with those images to offer an alternative framework for making sense of the cycles of life. The most telling aspect of this form of testimony, in which the entirety of the Psalm juxtaposes the Sun and the Lord, is that the Psalmist is not making a deductive argument to persuade his audience; he is making an argument

⁹⁰ Van Der Toorn, 238. She notes the narrative theological polemic against the sun on display in several OT texts. See Gen. 1.14-19, Job 9.7, 2 Kings 20.11.

from praise and personal *experience*. The Psalmist engages our *senses*. When we stand before the maker of the heavens, our only speech is one of praise.⁹¹ This method of engaging culture is one that is both inviting and captivating. In a world full of noise, the Psalmist directs us to wonder.

Acts 17.16-33: Paul's Pluralism, Our Secularity

Like our *field* of thought, this text finds Paul thrust into the center of his pluralistic world. After a successful visit to Berea, where Greek's were receptive to the Gospel, Paul has now moved onto Athens in his missionary journey and is awaiting the arrival of Silas and Timothy. The text begins with strong language: Paul is provoked (*παρωξύνετο*) by what he sees. Paul isn't simply bothered; what he sees creates an inner frustration that begets action. Acts uses this Greek word only one other time (15.39) when contention arises concerning John Mark. Further, with the scene of many idols being that which provokes Paul, the formerly zealous Pharisee converted earlier in the story, the context is ripe for a negative reaction. Idols/gods, and for our purposes, *ideas*, will be a theme of this scene. Luke is setting the scene for one of conflict, not one of pluralistic concession.⁹²

As soon as 17.17 Luke tells his readers that Paul has begun *reasoning* in the synagogues and marketplaces every day, seemingly preaching foreign deities and new ideas. He is not only

⁹¹ James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the logic of incarnation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 114-116. Invoking Augustine, Smith comes to this same conclusion theologically and calls it Augustine's "laudatory strategy."

⁹² Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as Both Critique and Propoganda," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 13.1 no 3 (2012) : 570-574. Jipp makes a powerful exegetical case, from historical and grammatical criticism, that this scene is more contentious than many interpreters have given it credit. Considering the forward literary movement of Acts, and Paul's mission eventually to Rome, the stop in Athens is a foreshadowing of conflict and resistance with authorities.

reasoning with common folk, but the text says he is reasoning amongst philosophers, Epicureans and Stoics, and he's making quite a negative impression. Therefore, he is "seized" and brought before the Aeropagus, the traditional place of vetting new religious ideas within Athenian society.⁹³ The language here is not one of mild invitation to debate. The notion of introducing foreign gods was no small issue in Athenian society.⁹⁴ The Greek *επιλαμβόμενοι* is later used in Acts to describe the seizure of apostles (16.19, 18.17, 21.30, 33) so we can imagine this text is one in which Paul is compelled to move from throwing around radical ideas in public, to one in which he must defend them amongst those properly authorized to hear them and warrant further proclamation.⁹⁵

It is clear what is at stake: Luke is setting the stage for a potential conflict between Athens and Christian faith. Paul is not in the Areopagus because he is challenging Jewish norms; he is there because his preaching is arousing the suspicions of *accepted pluralistic ideas* about the god's.⁹⁶ Standing before them, Paul's sermon is masterfully crafted to affirm the godly wisdom of pagan culture (i.e., general revelation), but with an ironic twist: the God of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of even pristine Greek philosophy. One need not trust prophets like Isaiah to come to this conclusion, but even Greek poets and philosophers undermine the

⁹³ Winter, 75-80.

⁹⁴ Jipp, 570-574. See also, F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 333. Socrates, as well as Anaxogoras and Protagoras, were accused of the same crime. Athenian courts were not always sympathetic to new pronouncements of deities.

⁹⁵ *A Greek, English, Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, s.v. "επιλαμβανομαι."

⁹⁶ Jipp, 577-578. The similarities in the accounts of Paul and Socrates' trials are striking.

confused religiosity of the Athenians. This shared history of ideas is the means whereby Paul can communicate effectively to a world that operates in a piously syncretistic frame.

First, he notes the piety of the Athenians. Whether his use of δεισιδαιμονεστερου is pejorative is up for debate, though the term does seem to be used tongue in cheek.⁹⁷ The translation of this term as “superstitious” would coincide with the thick irony of the presence of the Epicureans and Stoics, both of which have a shared tradition of criticizing this very thing, yet here is Paul, one they criticize as being a novice, representing their own Lucretius better than them.⁹⁸ Luke is hereby reversing the role of authority from the Aeropagian elites to a poor Christian missionary who is more consistent in his philosophy than professional philosophers. The recognition of the altar to an unknown God is the homiletical object lesson Paul uses to transition from superstition to proper identity of faith.⁹⁹

Paul goes on to make two primary parallels between his theology and that of the Greek poets. He uses verbiage that connects to the *field* and inner *habitus* of his hearers. First, he makes an iconoclastic appeal. He declares “the God who made the world and... does not dwell in temples made by human hands...nor is her served by human hands.” This sentiment, while consistent with Isaiah, is more importantly to *this* sermon consistent with Seneca and Heraclitus. Seneca states, “We should like to forbid the morning levee and sitting at the temple gates: human pride lets itself be ensnared by such exercises of religious duty...the gods need no domestic

⁹⁷ David J. Williams, *New International Biblical Commentary: Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 304. See also Bruce, 335 & Jipp, 576-578.

⁹⁸ Jipp, 576-586.

⁹⁹ Thor Strandenaes, “The Missionary Speeches of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and their Missiological Implications,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 99 no 3 (2011): 349-351.

servants.”¹⁰⁰ Paul’s sermon is grounded in a shared frame of reference. He isn’t telling them something new as much as he is reminding them of what they already *know*.¹⁰¹

Secondly is the shared appeal to the unity of humanity and a Hellenistic sense of the *imago dei*. The unity of humanity and *imago dei* was a significant doctrine of Hellenistic philosophers.¹⁰² When Paul writes that “he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the earth,” such is consistent with the LXX story of creation in Genesis where the Greek is verbatim, but it is also Stoic in the sense that all of humanity originates in Zeus. Paul further declares that God can be found because he is not “far from us.” Similarly, Epictetus reminds us, “You are a fragment of God; you have within you a part of him.”¹⁰³ These parallels cannot be ignored as merely coincidental. In this way, early elements of Christian faith included prior Hellenistic cultural commitments. A monotheistic trinitarian faith with syncretistic undertones was the reflexive *habitus* of the early church.¹⁰⁴ Paul uses semantic bridges of word, and idea, to direct the gaze of others to something that has captivated his own horizon.

¹⁰⁰ Jipp, 576-586. Heraclitus reinforces the point, “You ignorant men, don’t you know that god is not wrought by hands, and has not from the beginning had a pedestal...the whole world is his temple, decorated with animals, plants and stars”

¹⁰¹ Williams, 304-308.

¹⁰² For example, see Seneca, *Epistles, Volume II: Epistles 66-92*, in Loeb Classical Library, Trans. by Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 474-475.

¹⁰³ A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 180-206.

¹⁰⁴ Strandenaes, 347.

In sum, Paul exegetes his context. Paul is aware of the semiotic situation. He desires to transition to his testimony but must first start at a place of intelligibility. He did not impose foreign frames upon his listeners, but passionately appealed to them, combining what must have been an emotional polemic framed within Hellenistically viable terms as a means of proclaiming the message of Jesus.¹⁰⁵ This pivot may have been more natural for Paul, and Luke, than is often considered.¹⁰⁶

Like Paul, we are one with our world, our belief occurs *within* a context of secularity. Paul's sermon is powerful, at least in part, because he doesn't rebuke the Athenians. Rather, he manages to expound the ways in which the surrounding culture, which is in part *his* culture, coalesces around his faith commitment. Paul would perhaps never say that the Greek poets were on equal footing with the prophet Isaiah, but Paul is able to see that truth has been proclaimed even in pagan philosophy, it just needs a little help moving closer to its proper end.¹⁰⁷

Theology: Perspectives From Below

Phenomenology as Theological Method

“Theology must apply the phenomenological approach to all its basic concepts, forcing its critics first of all to see what the criticized concepts mean and also forcing itself to

¹⁰⁵ Susan Campbell, “Scratching the Itch: Paul’s Athenian Speech Shaping Mission Today,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35 no 2 (2011): 181-184.

¹⁰⁶ By the middle of the first century the Romans had occupied Palestine for centuries. Hellenistic thought patterns had so infiltrated Paul’s world that they were integrated into his life. The Hellenic world was his field

¹⁰⁷ This was an early Christian polemical stance. See Gerald Bray, “Explaining Christianity to Pagans: The Second-Century Apologists,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 9-25.

make careful descriptions of its concepts and use them with logical consistency, thus avoiding the danger of trying to fill in logical gaps with devotional material.”¹⁰⁸

John Macquarrie defines phenomenology as a “careful analytic description; It is the process of “letting us see that which shows itself (phenomena) by removing, as far as possible, concealments, distortions, and whatever else might prevent us from seeing the phenomenon as it actually gives itself.”¹⁰⁹ It is the art of *describing* what it is one sees when one is not yet quite aware that they are seeing anything at all. Like Moses observing the burning bush, we need to get a little closer to see what it *is* that we see and what it *is* that we hear. The event must be interrogated. The locus of this phenomena is human experience.

While the category of human experience on the surface seems quite mundane, profane even, it is precisely in mundane history that phenomena happen, and revelation occurs. When one describes the sorts of encounters that *inspire* thinking, religious conviction, or demands upon one’s life, we are describing things that are not merely mundane; One is describing the *phenomenal*. Like the example of Moses above, what was a mundane afternoon near Jacob’s Well became the scene of something phenomenal. Phenomena is such as it is something that can be observed *and* is that which captivates our gaze. The pre-burning bush Moses walked by was not so interesting; it was it’s catching on fire that got his attention. Likewise, just because a thing or event is seen, and can be seen, does not make it phenomenal. One’s gaze *must be* captivated by it; it is never captured. It must be worthy of approach. *God, and encounters with God*, theologically speaking, describe such events and are, therefore, subjects for phenomenology. In

¹⁰⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1* (Chicago: Chicago, 1951), 106.

¹⁰⁹ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1977), 35. Phenomenology has not been tried and found wanting, it has largely been found wanting and not tried.

this way, phenomenology is a proper theological method because it is a non-reductionistic approach to that which is observed.¹¹⁰

Unlike many theological or philosophically informed hermeneutical approaches, phenomenology does not so much define as it describes.¹¹¹ Based on this *revelation* one may *attempt* to characterize what is seen, with typologies, language games, possibly even structural (post-structural) categories, but that is always held within the dialectical tension that there continues to be something unavailable to human consciousness even in describing phenomena. The occurrence of the phenomena is the spark of holy inquiry; the event *produces* theology.¹¹²

One may protest that special revelation occurs from above, and then moves downward, only then being codified in scripture. Even so, such an event is still codified in a text and only applicable as *repetitive* revelation, the act of reliving a classic revelation.¹¹³ Humans never begin to think about religion in a vacuum; it is usually against the backdrop of some prior experience *in* history and *within* a community, never outside it. As Walter Brueggemann poignantly states in his discussion on “Rhetoric” in his *Old Testament Theology*, “I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of the Old Testament theology as such, lives in, with, and under the rhetorical

¹¹⁰ David F. Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd ed., (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 751. Also see Macquarrie, 90-96, for an epistemological discussion on this form of essentialist knowing.

¹¹¹ In this way, phenomenology and ethnography are complimentary modes of interrogation and interpretation.

¹¹² Of course, with this brief description I do not claim human experience is theology, or divine, but that the content of theology begins with engaging the phenomenal life of beings.

¹¹³ Macquarrie, 90.

enterprise of this text, and nowhere else and in no other way.”¹¹⁴ This statement is shocking at first because it grates against the sensibilities of persons of faith that believe they have experienced *a* being known as God.¹¹⁵ Brueggemann’s point, however, is not that “god” doesn’t *ex-ist*; it is that rhetoric assigns ontological purchase, and as such, is grounded in the textual witness of scripture and nowhere else. This is consistent with a phenomenological approach that grants revelation *begins* with phenomena involving humans as a *repetitive* form of revelation that provides a framework for *one*’s own personal experience. This would be particularly true if one’s experience of God occurs within a specific religious tradition but could also be true as latent deep symbols remain intimately woven into the lives of persons outside the confines of a particular biblical or religious construct.¹¹⁶

Phenomenology is the process of *observing* phenomena, being attentive to describe it, by whatever means the phenomena emerge. This is its chief strength: it seeks to understand what has happened for what has happened sake.¹¹⁷ Theological inquiry from this starting point begins with one’s personal encounter and is written as one makes sense out of what happened either to

¹¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 66.

¹¹⁵ Macquarrie, 86-89, carefully delineates the distinction between what one does, and does not, encounter in revelation. The human propensity to be filled with angst when confronted with the nothingness of life propels them on a quest for meaning in which *Being* is encountered. What one notices is being as such, that which is beyond grasping, but not beyond description.

¹¹⁶ Farley, 1-8.

¹¹⁷ Macquarrie, 36-37, poses three primary motivations for a phenomenological approach to theology that is consistent with what I have described. First, it starts with phenomena. Second, it seeks clarity. Third, and related to the second, it proceeds via description rather than deduction, thereby, avoiding falling into logical fallacies as classical natural theologies do. Though this approach doesn’t *prove* its descriptions (just as Charles Taylor’s narrative), it does provide a setting in which truth can be measured.

themselves or others.¹¹⁸ The only reason one would even care to think theologically is because *something* has connected with them so deeply through the repetitive revelation of history that they can do no other but try to make sense of what happened and what it means.

A Universal Anthropology: Rahner's Wager, Bevans Model

There is perhaps no greater influence on Post World War II Europe, and subsequent Post Vatican II thought, than Karl Rahner. Rahner, active in the ecumenical movements of the 1970's and 80's, wrote extensively on various reforms that could take place within Catholicism to assuage the tensions within its own communion, engender a greater sense of ecumenism, and respond to the swiftly post-Christian world that was emerging around him.

His later work, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, was his attempt to follow a Vatican II decree of integrating philosophy and theology into a foundational presentation available to new theologians. What followed was quite rigorous, doing philosophy within theology proper, attempting to create a unity within *fundamental* and *dogmatic* theology, without being *overly Christocentric* at the same time. In a prescient paragraph written nearly 30 years prior to Charles Taylor work, Rahner is writing with a similar context in mind. He observes, "The average person who comes to theology today does not feel secure in a faith which is taken for granted and supported by a homogenous religious milieu common to everyone...he is living in an intellectual and spiritual situation...which does not allow Christianity to appear as something indisputable

¹¹⁸James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 36-41.

and taken for granted.”¹¹⁹ Recognizing the shifting plausibility structures, Rahner was developing concepts for a new *habitus*.¹²⁰

To this end, his conceptualization of revelation and its implications for all persons, grounded in man as historical subject, was of critical importance. Rahner worked with a universal understanding of revelation, that revelation was an unveiling of God in all places, across historical epochs, and that it was deposited across all of creation.¹²¹ This Catholic (universal) way of thinking revelation is also quite Hegelian, in that this sort of metaphysical anthropology starts with “man as subject and as a person is a historical being in such a way that he is historical precisely *as* a transcendent subject; his subjective essence of unlimited transcendental is mediated *historically* to him in his knowledge and in his free self-realization.”¹²² Humanity is embedded *in* history through which revelation is disclosed, it being the subject of transcendence, while also being transcendent as a subject to think history. History is the category of human events, but humans can think above history, “Hence, man *realizes* [my italics] transcendental subjectivity neither unhistorically in a merely interior experience of

¹¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroads, 1989) 5-12.

¹²⁰ Brantly C. Milegan, “A Critical Examination of Key Claims Karl Rahner Makes About His Thesis of the Anonymous Christian,” *MA Thesis*, St Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas, 2015. Post-Christian Europe is the context for the “radical” Catholic theology that was emerging at the time and was the occasion of his more memorable thesis of anonymous Christians.

¹²¹ Rahner, 138-175.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 140. He sounds Hegelian in his description of man’s movement to God, “the transcendental experience of man’s movement and orientation toward immediacy and closeness to God, the experience as such prior to being made thematic reflexively and historically, must be characterized as real revelation throughout the whole history of religion and of the human *spirit*.”

unchanging subjectivity, nor does he grasp this transcendental subjectivity by means of an unhistorical reflection and introspection...”¹²³ Rahner argues that the history of humanity, and the history of transcendence within and without humanity, are co-dependent. Human history is the place in which immanence and transcendence collide in the human experience, the soil from which revelation emerges. This has important theological implications, not the least of which is the locus of revelation and the movement of God within history always already self-communicating whether humanity, as subject of transcendence in history, accepts this reality or not. In other words, God is sovereign and directing salvation history. Yet, God’s freedom and human freedom are conjoined in a history of mutual disclosure, not by any will of humanity, but by the freedom of God’s grace to communicate and the freedom of humanity to respond. ¹²⁴ Let us not forget, the entire point of revelation is to reveal Truth, and the goal of Truth, is to locate salvation. Rahner summarizes the results of this dynamic beautifully,

“There is never a salvific act of God on man which is not also and always a salvific act of man. To this extent it is clear that the history of salvation and revelations is always the already existing synthesis of God’s historical activity and man’s at the same time. To the divine history of salvation, therefore, always appears in the human history of salvation.”¹²⁵

Rahner has offered a uniquely Catholic spin on revelation and history from which to think ministry. Given the claims of the above biblical texts and the notion of revelation as always already deposited in creation and the transcendent nature of humanity, it is appropriate to start

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 141-146. Rahner always places this initial act in history as that of “God’s supernatural self-communication to man in grace,” while not limiting this self-communication to any single content of revelation such as Jesus.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 142.

with a *model of ministry that is grounded in anthropology*. History is the locus of revelation. If history is primarily constituted as a human construct via lived experience in cultures of various epochs, the Psalmist, Paul's, and our own, then of deep concern should be the value of the human context within which revelation is made known.¹²⁶

Stephen Bevans, in his *Models of Contextual Theology*, offers several models from which to think the missional enterprise.¹²⁷ Of these, his *anthropological model* is the most helpful guide within the philosophical, biblical, and theological foundations of this thesis. It should be noted, however that most critical ministry practice will include multiple models that overlap. No model can do justice to any single context given the complexity and dynamics of ever-changing contexts and contexts within contexts. Nonetheless, I want to be specific in the model that most heavily informs this thesis.¹²⁸

Foremost, human experience is the starting point of inquiry and concern.¹²⁹ This model centers on the conviction that God manifests Godself in every person, society, social location,

¹²⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 17. Nearly 35 years ago, Pannenberg was pressing this point, "Christian theology in the modern age must provide itself with a foundation in general anthropological studies. We are not here dealing with a position that one may or may not decide to accept...anthropology has become not only in fact, but also with objective necessity the terrain on which theologians must base their claim of universal validity."

¹²⁷ Bevans, vii-viii. The model that would best supplement the anthropological model of this thesis would be the transcendental model and its emphasis on one's own religious experience and one's experience of oneself. This model is consistent with Rahner's anthropology.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30. Models function as an "organizing image that gives a particular emphasis and enables one to notice and interpret certain aspects of experience." Their main purpose is to provide a paradigm for interpretation, and to provide a place from which to take ministerial action. Models are means of navigating a complex reality that helps one interpret a data set. They can be adapted to different contexts and emphasis as context may demand.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

and culture. The task of theology is not to impute a foreign *word* upon a culture, but to listen and attend to God's presence therein. As an interview approach in search for transcendent signals, the result of this thesis is the product of attending to stories as a means of seeing divine deposits from higher times. This model doesn't negate the influence of scripture or tradition, but it doesn't begin there either. It emphasizes cultural identity and its relevance for theology first,¹³⁰ then it can begin to work on semantic bridges from cultural expressions of being to biblical and traditional expressions of being.

Secondarily, however, this approach looks for how people use symbols and cultural takes to order and make sense of their lives.¹³¹ These social constructions are unique, and an anthropological model will not rely on a comparative analysis for greater understanding. The theologian's task is to observe and describe these phenomena as a means of constructing a local theology in this context, just as the multiple witnesses in scripture are less a total theology and more a witness to multiple local theologies constructed over millennia.¹³²

Incarnation as Theological Precedent

One of the major consequences of what Charles Taylor helped us map at the beginning of this chapter is what he defines as *excarnation*. The long trek to the secular eventually results in a world that is disembodied, abstract, abandoning communities of embodied practices and purifying the world of relics and rituals, as well as the bodies and emotions that once occupied

¹³⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹³¹ Ibid., 55.

¹³² Ibid., 59.

them.¹³³ Religious truth, for Taylor *Truth*, is divorced from its traditional loci and placed either into the deepest recesses of autonomous individuals or extricated altogether. The world has gone from incarnation, to excarnation.

In contradistinction to this movement, the unprecedented Christian doctrine of the incarnation makes the bold claim that bodies matter. Materiality and embodiment matters. Traditionally, this doctrine taught that God became man, taking up the earthy compost from which man is created and used it as a *means of revelation* toward humanity. God *contextualized* Godself to reveal Truth. Not only did God take up humanity, but scripture teaches us that God also resurrected it in Jesus. This certainly means many things, but for our present purposes it at least means that bodies and the *being* of humans are the conduits through which God chose to disclose godself and in which God has left vestiges of goodness. Hence, why all this historical fuss about resurrection? This thesis is not concerned with disembodied beliefs or unconscious Christians. This thesis, in engaging peoples *being*, is of the conviction that what the subjects of this study do with their daily lives matter and their bodies imbibe practices, *signs*, that point to a reality greater than themselves, whether they see it or not, as Rahner suggests. Reality is dialectical. Jesus said, “whatever you did for one of the least of these, you have done to me.” It logically follows Jesus could have said, “I am seen where I am not, therefore I am where I am not seen”.

¹³³ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 58-59, and Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 288.

CHAPTER 3

STARING INTO THE ABYSS: AN IMMANENT END?

Listening to Nones, Listening to Transcendence

There are no shortage of studies analyzing the cultural context in which we find ourselves in the United States. It is one that is categorized as a widespread move away from institutional religion and toward secular embodiments of faith and religious expression. Studies, polls, books, articles, and a host of columns have exploded into the professional religious marketplace in the last 5-10 years all attempting to describe, diagnose, and assuage this tide of irreligiosity.¹³⁴

Concern over decline has been further magnified following multiple studies from Barna and Pew Research narrating the decline of religious involvement and orientation, while signaling the rise in both the none and irreligious demographic. This phenomenon is not new globally. In fact, scholars such as Peter Berger, were announcing these trends nearly 50 years ago.¹³⁵ Claims such as these seemed to be outrageous at the time, prematurely predicting a cultural decline, yet these early intimations have turned out to be quite prescient. Furthermore, with Europe sliding toward ever-increasing incarnations of secularity (life devoid of intentional religious piety or direction), and recent data demonstrating even fewer percentages of the population with any

¹³⁴ Two examples of such studies are Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion* (HarperOne: New York, 2015), and Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion* (Oxford: New York, 2016). Bass collates multiple streams of data from Barna and Pew, crafting a narrative of anti-institutional bias emerging within American Christianity. Her text is one of the more well-known attempts to pull this data together into a coherent narrative. Drescher accesses similar data strands via ethnographic qualitative research. She is particularly interested in those who have left organized denominational Christian faith and constructed variegated religious expressions and practices.

¹³⁵ Peter Berger, *A Rumor Of Angels*, 1-27.

religious orientation whatsoever, commitment to institutional religion in the West seems to be nearing its own death rattle.¹³⁶

Much of the concern has been prescriptive in nature, offering macro-religious sociological takes. The principal parts of typical analysis have focused on general questions such as why teens are not embracing the faith of their parents, why evangelicals are leaving the church, or the conflict between faith and science.¹³⁷ However, little analysis has focused upon the non-religious segment of our populations in the North American South that grew up without any religious presuppositions.

While these queries are necessary, one is not hard pressed to find excellent analysis of them. The Church writ large *should* be concerned with why young people are leaving it, why older people choose to disaffiliate, or why growing segments of the population seem to be less religious than their forebearers. However, what many of these questions fail to consider is that *not all Non-religious people ever went anywhere, even, shockingly, in the Bible Belt South*. Some people are just None-religious, period. There is currently a large segment of the population that has grown up secular, people for whom not only was God never a question but the idea that God could be some sort of an answer was never an option. We live in an era in which there are

¹³⁶For a few notable examples on European religious statistics see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion> and <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>. “Christianity as a default is gone” and where such is not totally eradicated, practicing Christians are certainly a minority. Accessed 10/1/2019.

¹³⁷Drescher, 53-88. Her study is a notable example. She interviews former Evangelical, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics, attempting to ascertain why they left their organizational religious home for one molded after their own subjectivity, or what she refers to as their “manufactured spiritual self-invention.”

genuinely secular people: people that do not have a religious worldview with which to make meaning and for whom the conditions of belief are strained. It may be fashionable to state that many among us are “choosing our religion,” but it is equally true many among us were thrown into a secular context without religious bearing.

This population subset will comprise the primary subject of this study. This project is concerned with studying transcendent themes in the daily phenomena of the nonreligious, but it does so as a means of listening to the stories of those who have *always* been secular. This is the world in which we now live, even Bible belt. This project discerned if folks, who have come of age in a secular age, possess any vestiges of the gods or what Peter Berger calls “signals of transcendence.”¹³⁸ It sought to discover the multifaceted spectrum of cross pressures among the non-religious.¹³⁹ This approach offers a unique contribution to the missiology of the church as it is heretofore unexplored in this population segment. Many authors have gathered around the ideas and stories of those who have left the church, but few have considered the role of transcendent themes in the lives of those that are secular and have never participated in a faith community.

But where might this transcendence be located? I would like to suggest that we consider two areas of focus within the confines of transcendence as a working, though fluid, category. This study will focus on *interior* and *anterior* loci of transcendence but only as both of those emerge in how secular Nones make sense of their everyday comings and goings. This is another

¹³⁸ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 52-53.

¹³⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 555 & 594-617. By cross pressure, Taylor means the pressure felt by secular persons as closed (immanent) and open perspectives (transcendent / ineffable) tug for viability within their sense of self.

primary emphasis of this study. This study is not concerned with submerged unconscious Jungian desires as it is with daily embodiments. We are searching for how it appears in plain sight, subject to the illumination of each day. Therefore, we must allow for transcendence to emerge from both outlets because in an age of secularity, tightly canvassed against the frame of authenticity,¹⁴⁰ forms of inward value systems will have an incarnate form.¹⁴¹

Taylor Incarnate: Transcendence from Within

One of the hallmarks of a secular age is the move toward an inner shape of transcendence, predicated upon a personal quest for authenticity. Taylor understands this interior move as a natural outgrowth of the process of disenchantment. He describes it thusly,

Here I want to mention first it's inner side, the replacement of the porous self by the buffered self, for whom it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling and purpose, all features we normally ascribe to agents, must be in the minds, which are distinct from the outer world. The buffered self begins to find the idea of spirits, moral forces, casual powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible...we might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within.¹⁴²

Under Taylor's caricature, the traditional role played by ideas of God have now moved to the self, to the self's deepest and interior parts of the person, an interior transcendence. Of course, this is nothing new. Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Freud, Lacan, James, to name a few, demonstrated the proleptic force of an interior transcendence all recurring within the broader context of a humanity. What we are witnessing is the full-scale advent of the psychological

¹⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1991). This work presages Taylor's, *A Secular Age*. It focuses more acutely on the theme of authenticity as locus of meaning within a secular psyche. As such, it acts as a propaedeutic to the larger study of conditions of belief.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 13-29. See also Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475-476.

¹⁴² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-540.

revolution that characterizes modernity. The difference today is that the secular has become a means of religious discovery, a re-turn to interiority, the placement of the “out there” in the locus of self-abys. These former religious figures (and even secular linguists to a degree) believed that a transcendent God (or inscrutable place of meaning) was pressing upon them. Today, this shift means that those same transcendent feelings and anxieties no longer need to rely on a metaphysical mover other than the depths of one’s own being. It is the inbreaking, rather than the great neo-orthodox Barthian outbreaking, that is the locus of divine revelation.

Subsequently, we discover the attachment of the transcendent, or concepts thereof, to the authentic self as located *within* the interior recesses of individuals. This shift can be labeled as a liminal transcendence most accurately incarnated as the quest for God within one’s own undiscovered depths. As earlier noted, this move is historically capitulated from enchantment, to deism, to exclusive humanism. In the process, this new liminal-self sublimates God, reduces categories of transcendence to the materiality of the body, and then extends outward to envision transcendence as human flourishing that cannot imagine an other-worldly objective goal.¹⁴³ There is no place for religious quests to go, i.e. eschatologically/cosmically, other than inward. The old theological category of eschatology is transformed into a means of self-discovery. Once that inward promise land is located, only then can one return to the place where one was and participate in ushering in materialist utopias that imagine all fulfillment in the present, a *fulfilment only authoritative for that individual*.

In finding oneself, one therein finds God. The irony of this personal quest, as Taylor eludes, is that it can lead one to negate the self in the Other (i.e., religion) via the journey but this

¹⁴³ A contrasting value set would be Taylors notion of agape. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 246-247.

negation is a dialectical sleight of hand: it is an embracing of the collective *for the sake of finding the self*. The latter collective is only given importance as a means toward one's authentic self-expression and modern courage to face the real world in all its terrible glory.

What Taylor describes is the move from the porous self to the buffered self. Life, once filled with meaning via objects in the world and the grand narrative of one's place in the Ancient Regime, is now located in the modern moral order of self-discovery and authenticity. Now, when we feel overwhelmed by an outside stimulus, our wonder drives us inward to discern the encounter. One might now contend that liminal transcendence implies that we are no longer attempting to get our heads in the clouds; we are attempting to discover the wonder of the clouds in our heads.¹⁴⁴ This research grants that shift and reveals this newfound home of God.

On the other hand, transcendence may also have salient features that extend into the mundane orderings of how we plan our days. Taylor does not negate the notion of an exterior transcendent referent. In fact, he references it throughout his narrative. What Taylor provides is a story of how, and why, the primary avenue for many in a secular age is the collapsing of categories of transcendence into immanent frames of reference and meaning. As such, he points one's sociological research into that inner realm of the other as a locus of information and lends the researcher hints toward a viable model through which to do sociological, and therefore missiological, exploration.

Peter Berger: Transcendence from Without

For whatever reasons, sizable numbers of the specimen "modern man" have not lost a propensity for awe, for the uncanny, for all those possibilities that are legislated against

¹⁴⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. Reprint Ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 22. Of poetry and faith Chesterton notes, "The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits."

by the canons of secularized rationality. These subterranean rumblings of supernaturalism can, it seems, coexist with all sorts of upstairs rationalism.¹⁴⁵

Berger's underappreciated work, *Rumor Of Angels*, nearly 30 years prior to Charles Taylor's analysis of secularity, contends that there are structural edifices of supernaturalism, intimations of transcendence, that have not succumb to the progressive theory of secularization. Writing within the contextual shadow of dialectical theology, and at the twilight of structuralism, Berger is using his sociological insights to make an anthropologically theological turn toward analyzing human behavior as a key to locating transcendence. He is interested in irreducible leanings and commitments incarnated in the every-day actions of people.

A secondary concern is to notice these occurrences as objectively as possible and to avoid "mood theologies" and philosophies of the 20th century that seemed to be overly emotive, and thereby, fluid and contextually restrained. Berger is interested in connecting with a structural human experience that is not held captive to the *krisis* of neoorthodoxy, the angst of Freudian psychology, or culturally "relevant" theologies such as the once notable Death of God movement.¹⁴⁶ Berger reminds us that while all thinking is a thinking from someplace, the "theological decision will have to be that 'in, with, and under' the immense array of human projections, there are indicators of a reality that is truly 'other' and that the religious imagination of man ultimately reflects."¹⁴⁷

Thus, Berger offers us an additional area of investigation to Taylor. While Taylor discloses the interior terrain of the secular subject as vehicle through which transcendence is

¹⁴⁵ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 29-48, 51-52.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 47.

thought, and emerging from, Berger offers an anthropological starting point via fundamental human experience as a means of connecting to the meta-historical. Making a linguistic turn and employing the semiotic language of “signs,”¹⁴⁸ Berger suggests that transcendence appears in signals of everyday human experience and are not simply buried deep within Jungian archetypes.¹⁴⁹ He describes the location of transcendence thusly,

“I would suggest that theological thought seek out what might be called signals of transcendence within the empirically given human situation. And I would further suggest that there are prototypical human gestures that may constitute such signals. By signals of transcendence, I mean phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.”¹⁵⁰

What this thesis discloses are is not only forms of inner transcendence, but obvious forms of daily expression wherein transcendence is not something hidden in the deepest recesses of the unconscious. No. These can be clearly apparent in how a person spends their weekend, what value sets they establish as normative, or in what they might hope, and all being done apart from a rational argument to establish their daily behaviors, the commitments themselves providing the rational in their very unspoken incarnational expression. What forms might these daily expressions take? What transcendental signs need direct one’s attention?

This study employs all five of Peter Berger’s sociological signals and it adds, to provide an even broader base, the deep symbols offered by Edward Farley as additional categories through which to interpret the prism of the human experience in this study. It should be stated that these signals are not signals of transcendence *because* it can be argued by the users of them

¹⁴⁸ For a thorough study of signs, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 16th ed. (Peru, IL, Open Court, 2006). See especially “Concrete Entities of a Language,” 101-105.

¹⁴⁹ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

that they point to transcendence. To the contrary, the implementation of these things in everyday life are indicative that modern people possess ancient signals without a specific justification. These signals are part of the *habitus* of us all and they are expressed within a cultural *field*. As Bourdieu makes clear, *habitus* refers to “representations which can be objectively regulated, and regular, without any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations...”¹⁵¹ Similarly, we could use Taylors phrase, “givens,” that are a part of the fabric of human experience apart from empirical justification even as they are subject to empirical witnessing. In other words, we are getting at the unthought but active parts of regular daily occurrences: what people do without thinking about what they do as being the gateway to transcendence, some-thing more than immanent.

Berger presents five suggested areas of sociological behavior as conduits for transcendence, which as actions or feelings, represent these sorts of unthought meta-historical human experiences. These are: the human propensity for order, the argument for play (entertainment), the argument of hope, the argument from damnation, and the argument from humor.¹⁵² To these five signals, Farley notes five additional deep symbols that seem to have been lost, yet also latent, in what he calls our “postmodern” experience.¹⁵³ Farley’s deep symbols are:

¹⁵¹ Bourdieu, 72 & 79, Scharen, 76-77, and Bourdieu & Wacquant, 20-22. *Habitus* refers to the structures that operate *within* agents, often unthought, that makes infinite responses possible. It is what we do without knowing that we are doing anything that gives these actions or perceptions meaning. *Field* refers to the structure/boundaries within which the habitus takes form, the way to name objective relations within a specific construct or domain.

¹⁵² A detailed exposition of each of these signals is provided by Berger, *Rumor of Angels*, 53-72.

¹⁵³ Farley, 29-110. A chapter is dedicated to each symbol.

tradition, obligation, the Real, Law, and hope. Since Farley is expressing the embedded nature of deep, ancient symbols (which have signs of representation), within society's sociology of knowledge, his symbols act as further evidence of an enchantment once present. Like Berger, Farley notes the metahistorical characteristic of deep symbols, recognizing the tension between "the local, historical particularity of deep symbols and their apparent transcendence of particularity by their relation to the sacred and the interhuman."¹⁵⁴ These words of power, as he calls them, are essential to the fabric of human communities, even if mere traces of them survive. Of course, neither Berger nor Farley offer an exhaustive list of human signals that could point to transcendence, but they do provide touchstone referents, a beginning taxonomy, with which to map common human experiences. The aim is not to detail every transcendental signal, but to provide structure that might lead to a rediscovery of the depth of the riches of everyday human experience that is open to mystery and the captivating hold the "gods" may still have upon us.

Demographic Affairs: Recent Pew and Barna Data

The quest for salient features of transcendence in contemporary life is needed because of the story of its absence and demise. The decline of institutional forms of religion, and orthodox faith expressions, are reason for concern, but the notion that a public less engaged in spiritual institutions is devoid of transcendental reference points is a false deduction.¹⁵⁵ Though our world is hyperconnected, people groups are more disconnected and the perceptions of others can be misconstrued through biased perspectives or simply a lack of reliable information. A glance at

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., xi.

¹⁵⁵ Statistics on religion are full of odd correlations. For example, people of faith may be shocked that recent Barna research on the churchless in America discovered 1 in 6 Americans that claim to be "born again Christians," are churchless. See George Barna & David Kinnaman, *Churchless* (Austin, TX: Tyndall Momentum, 2014), 84-89.

the American political scene is indicative of the deep divide that exists among people who share so much as Americans yet are still segregated ideologically. People of faith often feel the reality of a more secular, plural age, but what they are feeling may be quite different than what is taking place to others around them. Some brief statistics on the shift of contemporary religious expression were shared in chapter one, but at this point I aim to press the point a little further from a statistical perspective as our historical moment seems to mark an epochal shift.¹⁵⁶

Nearly 100 years ago, there were around 600 million Christians in a world of 1.6 billion people and 70% of those Christians lived in North America or Europe. Fast forward to 2020, now over 60% of Christians reside in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and only one-third live in the traditional West.¹⁵⁷ The world may be just as spiritual, maybe even more so, with pluralistic expression an apt testimony, but the West is every bit as secular as Charles Taylors narrative describes, in particular regarding the conditions of belief. What we are experiencing in the West is not merely a shift in sentiment or a fickle mood swing; we are witnessing a wholesale cultural shift (post shift even?) of the narratives people use to make sense of their lives and endow their worlds (our shared world) with meaning.¹⁵⁸

From 2007 to 2014, Pew Research conducted 35,000 RDD surveys in their Religious Landscape Survey to determine the partial state of religion in America since the 2007 study. From these surveys, it was found that America is continuing its slide into irreligiosity. Among its key findings were the decline in percentages of all organized Christian affiliations, while it

¹⁵⁶ Bass, 31.

¹⁵⁷ Bryant L. Myers, *Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission and our Hyperconnected World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 197.

¹⁵⁸ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 34. See discussion on “plausibility structures.”

learned of a rise in those that claim to be unaffiliated. The study also found a decline in the number of persons who claim to be Christian. The study concluded that nearly 23% of America is unaffiliated and can be described as nonreligious. In fact, the group of persons who identify as religiously unaffiliated was the fastest growing group in that seven-year span, from an estimated 37 million to an estimated 56 million persons, accounting for nearly 23% of the overall population.¹⁵⁹

Barna conducted research within that similar period and concluded that nearly 38% of the adult population is now post-Christian, which is largely composed of younger generations: 40% of Generation X and 48% of millennials identify as post-Christian.¹⁶⁰ In addition, Barna found that there was not a single demographic for which church attendance saw an increase. Barna concluded the opposite: 10% of those surveyed were completely unchurched (meaning never been to a church service for any reason), 33% were essentially secular, and when combining adults and children, Barna estimated that nearly 156 million Americans are not engaged in any church.¹⁶¹ Diana Bulter Bass reports similar findings. Citing the work of multiple researchers, and taking into considerations degrees of probability and error, the real number of weekly observable worship attendance in America is more credibly around 16% to 22 % of the populace.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Pew Research Center. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." Pewforum.org. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (Accessed September 27, 2016)

¹⁶⁰ Barna, "Five Trends Among the Unchurched." Barna.com. <https://www.barna.com/research/five-trends-among-the-unchurched/> (Accessed September 27, 2016)

¹⁶¹ Barna, *Churchless*, 7, 9, 33-34.

¹⁶² Bass, 54.

In 2019, Pew posted further findings on religious research in America from data collected 2009-2019. Though this study was not the equivalent to its earlier Landscape studies, it did conclude that the trends in religion seen in 2014 were marching unabated in 2019. The additional data included 88 surveys and interviews with 168, 890 Americans. The study reinforced the rise of the non-religious and the decline of institutional Christianity. Nones were learned to compose roughly 26% of the population, only a 3% increase since 2014, but a 17% increase in the prior decade. In addition, a greater number of Americans now say they attend church less frequently than those that say they attend weekly. All mainline denominations continued their decline. The study confirmed the findings of Barna five years earlier as there is indeed a generation gap on religious observance and participation. Pew found that 22% of millennials never attend any religious service and 64% only attend a church a few times a year (think Easter, Christmas or the random funeral). When the populations of Generation X and Millennials are combined, 65% of that group are now unaffiliated with any religion.¹⁶³ Not only is this group growing less religiously observant, but they are also growing more secular regarding held beliefs.¹⁶⁴

Though these statistics can be alarming, there is a silver lining that insulates our study. Among Barna's findings, 66% of unchurched people say they are spiritual, more than half say their faith (though it is non-institutional in dedication) is important, and 69% had a favorable

¹⁶³ Pew Research Center. "In U.S. The Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pewforum.org. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> (Accessed October 10, 2016).

¹⁶⁴ Pew Research Center. "Religious Nones Are Not Only Growing, They Are Becoming More Secular." Pewforum.org. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/> (Accessed May 2, 2020).

view of Christianity.¹⁶⁵ It is, therefore, not a foregone conclusion that unaffiliation is akin to embracing atheism or agnosticism, which still accounts for very modest populations sets.¹⁶⁶

While there is much to be said about these statistics, for our purposes there are two immediate consequences. First, this data represents a real change and shift in culture and the stories we are learning to tell ourselves. It is not simply a feeling we have about the world changing; it has changed and will continue rapidly in the years ahead. To see contemporary Europe is to see our future selves. However, there are still common human experiences that people of faith, no faith, or syncretistic faith, share. Though some bridges of religiosity have been lost, this research is important because it explores other areas of human commonality worth exploring such as how we make meaning, cope with challenges, raise our children, establish norms of societal justice, and even live life with hopeful expectancy. One can read statistics, and often, the result can be an “us versus them” mentality. As a pastoral ethnographer, one cannot allow the statistics to tell the entire story of human experience. Data such as gleaned from Pew, Barna, and others, provide cultural apparatuses from which to engage our neighbor.

Secondly, the data demonstrates that while organized religion is on the decline, religiosity is not. Even among those who are no longer affiliated matters of faith *still matter*. As members of a broader culture, one of Judeo-Christian heritage, it would be more surprising to learn of the absence of transcendent sediments than it would to grant that even the least devout among us may possess structured modes of being in the world that cannot be accounted for through

¹⁶⁵ Barna, *Churchless*, 47.

¹⁶⁶ Pew Research Center. “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious Nones.” PewForum.org. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/> (Accessed May 2, 2020). Only 7% of the total US adult population identifies as atheist, with 13% of all Nones identifying as such.

empiricism, rationalism, or cultural “spins.” There are simply some things that cannot be reduced to hardened rationalism: faith, hope, love, beauty, order, and condemnation to name a few. These acknowledgements leave the church with two courses of action: this data is used as a reliable sign that can help the church understand local expressions of human meaning making or the data can be considered something to be overcome through *decontextualized* modes of outreach and relationality. Though this thesis is predicated on the former option, there is sadly no want of ecclesiastical commitment to the latter in an outmoded model of translation theory.¹⁶⁷

Reflexivity and Emic Practice as Challenges to Research

How does one go about beginning research into this culturally knotty problem and what are some of the obstacles that could occur along the way? Obstacles may range from data collation and gathering, to the truthfulness of participants in an overt study, to discerning the proper questions and context for a productive interview, to even the inability to listen. These are common challenges that emerge in most forms of qualitative research. However, there are unique ethnographic and cultural challenges that emerge when commencing ethnographic research of the kind proposed in this study. Two challenges are notable and have to do with the *position* of the ethnographic researcher: ethnographer *reflexivity* and the tension of *emic practice* (western research within shared western constructs). In other words, the minister ethnographer must be self-aware on two fronts.

Reflexivity is perhaps the single most challenging aspect of any ethnographic research project, yet it is also the most crucial. An emphasis on ethnographic reflexivity is one of the main

¹⁶⁷ Bevens, 38-44. The first model he notes is the translation model, a model of gospel communication that passes on a “core” set of beliefs into another context. He notes, “the translation model insists that there is ‘something’ that must be ‘put into’ other terms. There is always a something from the outside that must be made to fit inside.”

foci that set Bourdieu's research method apart from earlier structural methodologies, and for good reason, because too often former structuralist dominated forms of inquiry led researchers to determine outcomes and reduce observable reality to the specter of academic gaze. Researchers often proved, or disproved, their own theories by testing them on subjects, in a sort of tone-deaf structuralism.¹⁶⁸ Researchers brought models to their work and overlaid them upon their research subjects, resulting in Narcissus peering through the looking glass and many times finding himself.¹⁶⁹ Bourdieu's work offered a response to this non-reflective ethnographic practice and subjected sociology and ethnographic research to its own methods.

Bourdieu's method was notable for its results when researchers were doing embedded analysis inside a different culture, whether the culture be one that traverses type, kind, or national boundaries.¹⁷⁰ Following his insistence on reflexivity, the ethnographer became that which inscribed what was seen, even peering into her own field of vision, rather than seeing what had already been inscribed with sociological theory. The ethnographer was not imposing foreign theories upon the subjects. The task was to live, listen, and learn, and thereby, construct a sociological analysis that accurately reflected the subjects of study but could only be determined *within* the research itself. Thus, without reflexivity that penetrated more deeply than simple self-

¹⁶⁸ Scharen, 74.

¹⁶⁹ Bourdieu & Wacquant, 39, 71-72. Bourdieu's method of reflexivity distinguishes itself from common theories of reflexivity with its inward turn onto the field of academia, subjecting the theory and researcher to the same criteria as the sociological reality being observed. In other words, employing reflexivity is to recognize that academic sociology is as much a field, with a habitus, as the subject being studied. All research must overcome this obstacle through theory produced *out of* research. See Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72-94.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 45, for an example of a national boundary. See Loic Wacquant, *Body & Soul: notebooks of an apprentice boxer* (New York: Oxford, 2004), for an example of culture analysis of a different type, a local context *within* a context, a subtext.

awareness, the result of the research would be nothing more than an academic echo chamber that did more to establish researcher superiority over their subjects than to establish any sort of empathy with the subject and lead to action that might solve a problem revealed through the research.

A second challenge to this research is sharing the same culture as those I will be studying and then selecting a methodological approach from within which to think about this engagement. This challenge is known as the “problem of native exegesis or emic analysis.”¹⁷¹ Listing several obstacles to listening, Robert Schreiter especially notes the difficulty here,

Do members of a culture have enough perspective to describe their own culture objectively and analytically? And is a native description of a culture necessarily a true description of culture...In our description of ourselves we overlook things that outsiders might consider important, or we misunderstand relationships because of inherited common sense.¹⁷²

This challenge is most observable in the foundational narrative framework upon which this study is predicated: the slow lurch of history, from enchanted to disenchanted world, that has ushered in our current secular age. The challenge is in the diagnostic and correlative aspects of research because natives researching other natives, as I am here, can often miss a given cultural “take” because it is part of our accepted field of behavior. However, just as reflexivity is an obstacle that Bourdieu helps navigate, so too this challenge can be predominately met through reflexivity and *inscribing the signs given* rather than creating signs from out of their utterances. As a native describing other natives, there is a distance between my location as an ethnographer

¹⁷¹ Schreiter, 47 & 80-81. Schreiter also notes how *root metaphors* govern semiotic domains and are often shared across those that share those domains of meaning. It is crucial when a root metaphor emerges in the interview process to not assume its meaning as a shared construct. See also Sensing, 93-96.

¹⁷² Ibid., 48.

and the subjects of this study: the distance of religious framework. The goal of this research is to see how *others* construct meaning *apart* from an institutional religious framework. This is why this study matters: it seeks to disclose the long shadow of transcendence that continues to creep through the forest even as the sun sets on the story of a particular god.

Lastly, one's theological presuppositions will determine the applied contextual ministry model to help make sense of the research. This research is sociological in nature, but its undertaking is predicated on theological convictions and on one's theory of general revelation. Models of missiology that may be produced from out of this study must be inductively determined by the type of study and not by decontextualized doctrinal demand. We must here employ a model of contextualized ministry that is *anthropological* in nature as we are seeking signals of transcendence (remainders of Truth embedded in human experience) within the goodness of the human person as such.¹⁷³ A central conviction of an anthropological model is that "human nature, and therefore the human context, is good, holy and valuable."¹⁷⁴ This model values the human experience as a touch point for revelation. Divine revelation occurs at the level of creation and then moves toward the object of God. The incarnate Christ becomes the stuff of carnal creation *in order to* reveal God, the material revealing the immaterial. Thus, the challenge of choosing a model within which to formulate, and present, the missiological ramifications of this study must be one that looks for God's revelation within the values and everyday actions of people. If one's area of inquiry is human experience, then one's contextual model must also be one that makes as its starting point said experience.

¹⁷³ Bevans, 55.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

A Qualitative Approach: Details on Method

There are two primary types of research with subjects: qualitative and quantitative research. This thesis employs a qualitative method. Qualitative research is characterized as a multi-method approach, the overarching goal of which is to seek answers to questions by examining individuals who inhabit various social settings. It is a research methodology that attempts to make sense of, and interpret, phenomena that emerges from human experience and describes moments and meanings in the lives of individuals.¹⁷⁵ A focal point of this method is that “researchers are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth.”¹⁷⁶ A qualitative method is notably designed for smaller sample sizes and specific contexts. As a relational research approach, qualitative research is usually conducted with methods that involve human participation such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, case studies, observation, narrative analysis, and even participant homework to name a few. The success of qualitative research is measured by sample size, diversity, and insight. It is not disparaged due to the sampling size of the participants and could be limited in participants depending on the specific problem being investigated.¹⁷⁷

Within the qualitative method employed in this thesis, it should be stated that this thesis project has one primary mode of research intent: to contribute to the existing knowledge base on

¹⁷⁵ Sensing, 57.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Quantitative research is the other notable method. It is an approach that is generally interested in large data sets, usually larger than small local ecclesiastical contexts, and interested in concrete observable data that can be analyzed, measured, and studied.

the subject and contribute new theory in the field of analysis concerning transcendent signals in the life of secular Nones. This object will be met employing three primary methods of data collection that is consistent with qualitative research: Semi-structured interviewing, Narrative research within the interviewing process, and developing a taxonomy.¹⁷⁸ Given the limited time constraints and subject sampling size, these three methods will be employed to give the study more range and depth. Further, data triangulation across those methods of collection, and across participant experiences, will be noted to discover correlation that could prove indicative for the results of the study. This study includes three participants that meet the study criteria proposed above.¹⁷⁹ The interviews take place over a four-week period, covering 1 hour each session, but not more than 90 minutes, and were determined by participants. Interviews were conducted via zoom. Interviews were recorded with a recording device and then transcribed for further analysis and coding. The researcher collated the data as it converged and diverged within the participant sampling and presented it within a taxonomy of deep symbols. The data was further analyzed under the boarder categories of Peter Berger and Edward Farley and explained in kind via ethnographic description.

However, these categories are primarily starting points, not rigid funnels. As with all qualitative research, there was room to adjust these codes according to participant responses. Berger and Farley provide the framework from within which to think and execute this project. It

¹⁷⁸ Sensing, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 85. The small sample size is chosen to allow for depth of exploration and analysis. Sensing notes that a one-hour interview will produce 10-15 single spaces pages of text. This study will undertake 4 total interviews, thus, if the study includes four participants that is 160 pages of total material to code and analyze. It is the desire of this researcher to provide quality analysis over quantity of persons. Future studies could be performed that build on the results of this initial research.

is the basis upon which my exploratory questions have been developed, providing a road map of shared human signals from out of his experience as a sociologist. Nonetheless, this research predicate is structuralist, and it would squarely fall under the critique of Bourdieu's ethnographic methodology that discloses the inherited field of biases within academic sociology as well.¹⁸⁰ As Sensing notes, the researcher should not "force a coding system onto the data that somehow bends to fit your presuppositions."¹⁸¹ Berger's work is, then, a Straussian point of departure, kept in check with Bourdieu's methodological insistence of avoiding inscription by an academic theorist. Bourdieu spans the chasm of knowledge between theoretical structuralism (Berger never recorded testing his hypothesis in *A Rumor of Angels*) and practical embodiment, precisely because he desires for the subject to keep its autonomy, its integrity as objective witness, not held in captive gaze by the specter of a theory that seeks to fetishize its nature. Thus, this research process seeks to do the same: being aware of the theoretical apparatuses of doing a thesis project, and the position of power as author, this thesis will seek to listen and write their stories as they are told, using Berger and Farley's categories where applicable and creating new signals of transcendence as they may emerge from out of the interviews.

Interviewing: Descriptive, Structural, and Contrast Questions

The interview methodology herein used is that of James Spradley's reflexive interviewing technique. For Spradley, the task of ethnography is to understand the human species in context, to be concerned with the meaning of actions and events of the people we seek to

¹⁸⁰ Bourdieu & Wacquant, 218-260, wherein Bourdieu provides an erudite, and detailed, explanation of the tensions at work and the corrective he sought in his work.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 203.

understand, and to produce research results that can be used to serve the needs of others.¹⁸² To best accomplish this, the researcher must come at their research subject with a conscious attitude of complete ignorance. The researcher desires to learn from the participants of the study. This implies shallow and deep forms of reflexivity, as Spradley notes the task before the ethnographer is to document alternative realities and to describe them in their own terms.¹⁸³ Thus, Spradley's approach to the theory and practice of ethnography corresponds with Bourdieu's own insistence on reflexivity.

Spradley's text is a guide to the ethnographic interview process, noting theories of language, culture, practice, and the selection of informants. It is a "how to guide" for the novice ethnographer. Most of his text explains different types of questions and compiling the resulting data. For purposes of quality analysis, this thesis primarily employs three main types of questions offered by Spradley's technique: *descriptive*, *structural* and *contrast* questions. Within these broader types of questions is a refined taxonomy of questions that provide further investigation with interview subjects.¹⁸⁴

Descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant's native language and are designed to get an informant to discuss, at length, a particular cultural scene.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2016), 5, 13-16.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11. Spradley's insistence on reflexivity dovetails nicely with the deeper reflexivity proposed by Bourdieu: that reflexivity should be turned upon the academic analysis and its theories as such, to prevent the subject becoming an object of theoretical gaze rather than a unique field from which to learn.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 223, for a summary. Tim Sensing has different summary for use in qualitative research. See Sensing, 86-88.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

It is also predicated on having some awareness of a common cultural scene upon which to frame the question. The goal of descriptive questions is to get the participant to describe a scene unknown to the researcher. Within this sort of questioning “grand” and “mini” tour questions can range from an in-depth portrayal of a specific time or place to minute details about actions or feelings during a scene. Some examples of descriptive questions are the following:

- Can you describe what it was like growing up in a humanist home? (grand tour)
- Describe for me how your family celebrated Christmas? (grand tour)
- How did you explain religious holy days, such as Christmas, to your children? (mini tour)

The primary focus here is to be aware of a scene within the participants cultural frame and allow them to describe it in detail. If the answer remains too broad, the researcher may press into mini tour questions to get intimate details.

Structural questions can be asked concurrently with descriptive questions because they are complimentary.¹⁸⁶ The goal of a structural question is to explore how a participant organizes their knowledge, how it is organized in their mind and in practice. They help the ethnographer discover folk domains, cover the terms for these domains, and take note of the terms that comprise the domains.¹⁸⁷ The ethnographer will most likely ask these sorts of questions as opportunity arises from out of descriptive answers.

Some examples of structural questions are the following:

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 131

- You mentioned you are a humanist? Are the different types of humanists, say in the way there are different sorts of Christians?
- Are they different sorts of religious persons? Spiritual persons?
- You mentioned witnessing something similarly evil. How did you know it was evil when you saw it? Did you any other concepts of evil behavior before witnessing this?

Lastly, *Contrast* questions may be asked directly or indirectly by asking participants for differences in the descriptive interview process.¹⁸⁸ The primary aim of a contrast question is to gain a knowledge of comparison between two folk terms, or domains, that have emerged in the interview process. This question is used by the researcher to gain more clarity into the structural knowledge of the participant by having them compare different terms. Contrasts are intended to be drawn from participant responses and, correspondingly, made by the participants.

The following are some examples of contrast questions:

- What is the difference between scripture and fiction?
- When you were younger and celebrated major Holidays, how did you understand these to relate to one another and how has that changed as you've gotten older?
- Can you contrast for me your understanding of secular law, the Ten Commandments, and the law, of say, your own home?

Contrast questions seek to disclose the self-awareness of the participant but also to understand how they connect, and distinguish, data or value sets. For this thesis, these

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 172.

questions could prove insightful because it could disclose a commitment to transcendent signals and allow the researcher to ask direct questions about some of Berger or Farley's sociological propositions.

Those on the Journey: Sampling and Participants

This research could not take place apart from the willing participation of three individuals to share their story. The criteria used when gathering this sampling of participants was to make sure they met the overall criteria for participation, which included: being a legal adult, identifying as non-religious, not being a former Christian, and not using a cleric at threshold moments of their life. There were no other forms of discrimination employed. The aim is to search for transcendent signals in the lives of persons raised secularly. Participants were selected via snowball sampling and third-party reference. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, each participant is noted as Subject A, B, & C.

Subject A is a once divorced, but now remarried, white female of 39 years of age, who is the parent of one child from her first marriage. She has lived in the South her entire life and was raised in Cleveland, TN. She was not raised in a religious home and has no connections to an established church. Her mother recently passed away and she did not reach out to any clerics for guidance nor did her mother have a memorial service. She is a self-described humanist. She has a High School diploma and some college credits but has not completed that degree. Her socio-economic status can be described as middle class, with work experience that ranges from factories and banks to the restaurant industry.

Subject B is a middle class, 50-year-old white female, who is married to her high school sweetheart. They have been married 30 years. She is the mother of two children, ages 24 and 30, both of whom identify as either agnostic or atheist. She spent early childhood years in Utah, but

then moved to Texas and has resided there for 40 years. She has a high school diploma and possesses a medical certificate as a professional lactation consultant, working with expectant mothers in Lubac, TX. She spent the first 14 years of her life in a Mormon household but never chose that faith on her own. She has never attended church as an adult, save obligatory holiday occasions when her grandparents were still alive. As a child she never had a Christian salvation experience of any kind. She identifies as non-religious, but spiritual and avoids institutional religious organizations intentionally.

Subject C is a 42-year-old white male, who has spent most of his life middle class, though now he is a new business owner (independent restaurant) and testifies to lower class status as an upstart owner. He is single, was briefly married in his twenties, and does not have any children. He has spent most of his life in Cleveland, TN, where he was raised, though he did spend a few years in Florida, and Knoxville, TN, before moving back to Cleveland 5 years ago. He identifies as a non-religious agnostic, who in his words, believes “there is something there, but I don’t know what it is.” He was raised secular, without any religious observances outside of pop-culture observances of holy days. He does not use clerical or ecclesiastical services.

Pastor As Ethnographer: Writing/Righting the Story

To describe pastoral work as ethnographic, is in the least presumptive, or at its worst, denoting someone who is ill equipped, or trained, to wield the tools of a wholly different academic and practical discipline altogether. This is because ethnography is chiefly a social scientific discipline, with its own unique history, philosophical presuppositions, methodological goals, and not to mention an academic guild that doesn’t seem to express much interest in

dialoging with pastoral theology, missiology, or any other discipline of the church.¹⁸⁹

Ethnography, a discipline that has its roots in anthropological observations, hasn't been traditionally paired with theological disciplines until recent Christian academic moves toward embedded practical, and corporate, theologies.¹⁹⁰ One of the earlier pastoral works to espouse ethnography as pastoral practice was John Patton in his *Pastoral Care in Context*.¹⁹¹ In our contemporary situation, there has been an influx of interest in ethnography as a means of applied ministerial research, two of the most notable and creative contributors being Mary Clark Moschella and Christian Scharen.

The nature of ethnography as primarily anthropological has lent itself naturally to pastoral work, and even biblical theology, particularly as greater attention is being given to contextualized ministry and the need to understand those with whom one is doing ministry as opposed to assuming the theological orientations of those around us and in our churches. Furthermore, the thoroughgoing narrational approach of ethnography, literally the writing of the other, is a prominent theme in scripture as the biblical text itself is a collaboration of story and witness to a community of believers with their own contextualized drama and salvation history.¹⁹² Christians are used to telling stories to communicate; they are used to listening to

¹⁸⁹ John Swinton, "Where is Your Church? Moving Toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 86-88.

¹⁹⁰ Moschella, 4.

¹⁹¹ John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 43-45.

¹⁹² Pete Ward, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 3. Ward writes, "Our Christological starting point does not support a distinction between social/cultural descriptions and theology as it is constructed in correlational

stories. As humans, creating stories is what we do. In its simplest terms, ethnography is a means for the pastor to learn, and then write, the story of others.

Mary Clark Moschella describes ethnography as a pastoral practice,

“Ethnography is a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about them...as a pastoral practice involves opening your eyes and ears to understand the ways in which people practice their faith...Ethnography is also about writing. In a pastoral context, it involves recording your observations and reflections, analyzing them, and creating a narrative account of the peoples local and particular religious cultural life.”¹⁹³

What becomes immediately clear from this definition is that ethnography is an experiential form of pastoral research into the embodied forms of the faith of others, or what Christian Scharen describes as “carnal theology.”¹⁹⁴ Following the work of Bourdieu, and positing that we learn by body, it is necessary to yield any expertise we may possess and understand that our primary task is not to come to our research subjects (church, secular community, etc.) as something to be fetishily observed, but as something to learn *from*, submitting ourselves to the discipline of listening.¹⁹⁵ Only thereby, through bodily submission, can one be guided to observations by our subjects rather than impute one’s gaze upon them.¹⁹⁶

method. If all things are ‘in Christ,’ then this must relate to social and cultural expressions and this is also true of the means that might be used to research it.”

¹⁹³ Moschella, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Christian Scharen, “Ecclesiology “From the Body,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 69. Scharen writes, “A carnal theology helps get at a level of community, of the church lived, that is not easily observable or interpretable short of the knowing that comes “from the body” through apprenticeship in situ.” See also, Scharen, *Fieldwork*, 91-109.

¹⁹⁵ Moschella, 141-166.

¹⁹⁶ Scharen, *Fieldwork*, 70-77. See also Bourdieu, 1-9.

The goal is to write an embodied narrative of understanding instead of harnessing the phenomenon of human experience via disengaged, alien, expertise.

Ethnography involves several methods of investigation, can encompass large- and small-scale research, and may be either qualitative or quantitative in nature dependent upon the researcher's goals. As John Swinton is apt to remind us, however, methods are carried out within a certain set of assumptions and we tend to choose methods according to what we assume we will see.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, as noted above, reflexivity plays an important role in ethnographic research. As a discipline, ethnography can include short term observations, interviews, analysis of speech patterns appearing in group discourse, use of surveys, and the introduction of group texts to be read and reflected upon.¹⁹⁸ The goal is for the researcher to directly engage with the community or subject(s) being studied, in order to systematically collect data without imposing meaning on the study externally.¹⁹⁹ In small scale research, this can mean a shortened study, such as the one being conducted in this research thesis project and span a time frame of a few weeks to several months. On a more grandiose schedule, the research can blend quantitative and qualitative research, even to the extent of living in a culture for an extended period as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Swinton, 76-77.

¹⁹⁸ Paul S. Fiddes, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?" in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 14.

¹⁹⁹ Swinton, 77.

²⁰⁰ For a journal of Wacquant's on reflexive sociology and its ethnographic result see, 13-149.

Thus, ethnographic theory grounded in an incarnational theology, allows the pastor to understand her research subjects within their habitus and to write about them *from out* of that situation. Through reflexivity, it allows the pastor to refrain from transcribing prejudices or imputing foreign theories as a means of structuralizing observations. The result is a research project that allows the pastor to add to her knowledge base, shine a light on what matters to people in a community, and probe in a safe, non-judgmental way, the diversity of cultural, social and religious practices and attitudes in a community.²⁰¹ This can help the pastor create safe spaces for understanding, and awareness, as well as constructing hermeneutical bridges between factions or people groups that may have been at presumed odds. Ethnography not only helps the pastor write a story, but it can help a pastor write rightly because it offers the means of deep listening to discern theologies, philosophies, feelings, or opinions, that are embedded in the habitus of the group and thus unthought.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Moschella, 34-35.

²⁰² Ibid., 40

CHAPTER 4

TRANSCENDANCE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VISION

The suggestion that theological thought revert to an anthropological starting point is motivated by the belief that such an anchorage in *fundamental human experience* might offer some protection against the constantly changing winds of cultural moods.²⁰³

Research as Revelatory Event

One engages in *re-search* to unveil something that is hidden. Built into its etymology, re-search is an act of *looking again*. But looking again at *what*? At first, the answer is not clear. Clarity is only gained when vision is cast again in the direction of an *occurrence*. This where method is crucial: one's method will determine one's gaze and gaze will determine what is being interpreted. Our gaze is directed anthropologically. This research is embedded within the framework that phenomena is disclosed in history and history is comprised of human agents. The human is the area of focus because it is the only means whereby *events*, even transcendent ones, can be turned into *texts* available to us. *To be human is to be textual*. Research is *not* revelation, but it is revelatory.

Yet, with all speaking there is a gap, a chasm, from what is known by the subject, and what they *can* say. Some things defy description. As researcher, I can hear what someone says, which is not the whole fact of the matter, but it is the only matter to which I have access. Multiple gaps are spanned, mostly ineffable, that while not fully surpassing these limits, something can in fact be said as clearly as anything can be said with signs. This is what I have

²⁰³ Berger, *Rumor of Angels*, 50 & 52. Italics and brackets mine. See a similar sentiment in Farley, 23, "the symbol has brought to expression a deeper normativity at work in the sphere of relation...the enchanted mysteries of human beings together in relation has not been totally abolished."

attempted to do in this research: span these gaps and locate the language of everyday practices and commitments within deep symbols and transcendent signals.

This is the act of ethnographic research, particularly regarding traversing the circumference of transcendence in daily life. The act of research *is revelatory* because it is the recognition, and writing, of phenomena that would not happen outside of the research, creativity and insights begotten from out of the interaction of persons who come together, sharing stories, and listening. *Was there ever a theophany that was not written?*

It soon became apparent that these interviews would not result in what either party expected. Participants shared information they weren't suspecting to share. Mini-tours were taken where at first only a grand tour highway was apparent. I was given pathways of insights that were only made available in the stories telling. I was given access to parts of participants that had never been shared, at least not like *this* because these stories were a *new* telling. In the telling, and the hearing, there was often more than what was being said. The act of research then is not the act of creating revelation; it is the act of noticing its leftovers. Interviews are not the progenitor of revelation, but an intentional attempt to see *what* has happened and *how* that affects what is happening when, say, one is coming home after work. This is the quest for transcendent signals and deep symbols, not their fabrication.

Holy Coding: Data Analysis

The below research results are the culmination of 12 different interviews, 15 hours of interview time, and 20,000 words of interview text. Given the research parameters of this thesis, one cannot include *all* the data compiled. As stated in chapter 1, the goal of this thesis was *not* to identify *every* signal or symbol, but to notate them in general as a means of creating missiological semiotic foundations between church and culture. To narrow our field of vision,

therefore, I will present the 5 symbols/signals that were identified as working concepts across *all* three participants. During the research process, all the signals were identified at least once. However, including only the signals that were in each participant lends a quantitative authority to this qualitative study that the following symbols are deeply embedded in human practice and value sets. The five symbols/signals that occurred with all five participants are: Tradition, Obligation, Play, Damnation, and Hope. This taxonomy is a collaboration of both Farley and Berger's observations and provides a field narrow enough for interpretive reflection to establish the goals of this project and flesh out the meaning of each.

Tradition

Tradition is a broad concept that refers to embedded practices, rituals, texts, persons, and wisdom that are handed down within a community from generation to generation. In this way, the past is remembered and incorporated into the present, removing the onus from every new generation to navigate the world without any bearings or communal grounding. Tradition becomes such as it relates to the Sacred: Sacred interaction with a specific community in the past that has contemporary significance. Tradition is the *being* of faith and faith practices. This living faith provides an authoritative bearing on the present, which admittedly, creates friction in a world characterized by humanism and the deconstruction of external sources of authority. Regardless, its presence is still felt and secured through the rehearsal of practices and embodiments of wisdom that have been handed down through the ages. The trouble is we live in a society that seems to be running from this deep symbol at breakneck speed. Yet, the departure is not so much a permanent exit, as it is a remaking in the shape of the self.

During the interview process I was able to locate the presence of tradition in each participant, which included three different types of people: a spiritual but not religious none, a

secular humanist none, and an agnostic none. Not surprisingly, none of the participants described their practices as the remaking of tradition in the face of its absence, but their *actions* were signaling that tradition *mattered* because it gave them a place within which to gather their own existential bearings. Traditions provide a footing, a grip, of the world. Whenever we slip, or fall, the reaction is to either find more grip or create it. Humans must have a place from which to act, a staging ground for their being. This is *tradition*. Another name for tradition can also be *home*.²⁰⁴ In a secular and non-religious demographic, it seems they can live without institutional faith, but they *cannot* live without a concrete connection to the material world that stabilizes and informs present being and future self.

How does one begin to uncover the role of *tradition* via the ethnographic process? How does one find this deep symbol? Sometimes it is obvious in what is said, for example, if someone deliberately talks about *creating* new forms of spirituality. Another means, and more narrative in form, is to ask questions that can connect past influences and present practices. This is not the only way, but this avenue of questioning resonated well with several participants. The concept of tradition emerged sharply, for the first time, in my research, when I asked the following:

Question: Is there anyone you observed as a child that inspired you to go into your current field of work?

Without hesitation one participant told me about her presbyterian great grandfather that was a local physician. Her eyes lit up when sharing how he was loved by his community, everyone knew his name, and he was selfless in his love for others. He had even started the first local sanitarium. She said she was inspired to go into the medical field because of his impression on her as a young child and that he embodied classic virtues such as kindness, generosity, and

²⁰⁴ Home was discovered to be a root metaphor for all signals and symbols. I explain this more in Chapter 5.

mercy. She concluded her remarks with what would become a familiar phrase, “you know, he was a good person.” Later in the interviews, I asked her definition of the “good” and it once again included these same characteristics, with the added definition “treating one another with humanity and dignity.”

The influence of her great grandfather, a man that would have passed away when she was 12 years old, certainly made a strong impression on this participant. All these years had passed, and her eyes still filled with admiration. This is an example of *tradition* continuing to influence her, and not just any tradition, but one grounded in Christianity since her great grandfather was a Believer of Presbyterian faith. Further, the transcendent values of love, mercy, kindness, generosity, are all hold overs from a latent theological past. There is no inherent reason to value these unless society finds them to be of value. There is no material reason to value her great grandfather or his Christian ideals over a different historical value set, such as the *lex taliones* ideal of justice or a Darwinian survival of the fittest ideology. Here we see an extended tradition that is ingrained within her that tells her these are “the good,” even though the good is grounded in something non-localizable and greater than any human science can define. Even concepts like love and servanthood, which predicate mercy and kindness, are extensions of *traditions* that are not necessarily instinctual. This informant also embodied several examples of remaking tradition on her own since she was not a part of institutional religion. Thus, in all forms of tradition, whether a past that has contemporary significance in her own embodied profession, or in the remaking of new traditions, tradition is a god-word quite active within her. She expressed disdain for outside authority, but it was clear she had at least one authority other than herself influencing her and it was a hinge upon which her life continues to move.

Another informant demonstrated a connection to this deep symbol, albeit within the realm of rethinking tradition. This insight emerged from a particularly mundane question. The grand tour question below led to a series of mini-tour questions that provided great insights into the new traditional spaces we create after evacuating the House of the Lord. Her reply is so insightful I have included the full body of the text.

Question: How have the day-to-day patterns of your life changed from when you were younger to your now older self?

Reply: A good chunk of my 20's I was a single parent. Get up, go to work, make sure he's ok. Different dynamic from going from small child to having an adult child. Now, we are homebodies. Our home is our happy place. We are collectors. By the time my days are done, I don't want to talk to people. Our house is like a museum. Everywhere I look I see something that we like, or a memory. My son's room is the only room in the house that doesn't have stuff on his walls. A lot of people, when they come into the house, take a deep breath. Our home is a lot for a lot of people. To me, the homes of others do not look lived in. You come to our house, and you see our personality everywhere. The home is an extension of us.

When she began describing the above, I instantly felt like she was detailing a holy place for me, a sanctuary, with relics and objects, sacraments even, that connect her to the past and give her meaning in the present. The admission that she is a “home body” further illustrates that she feels at peace (safe) around these *things*, in this *place*, where the sacred and profane mingle. The place is intentionally crafted to provide bearings and *grip* in a world that for so many does *not look lived in*. Her home is purposefully *different* to denote a stark contrast to the world outside of that space, just as a worship sanctuary would be, the home being a sanctified liminal geography. She may not have any religious traditions that animate her days, but she has been intentional about creating a space that screams her values, provides her with comfort, and connects her to the past. She is not alone in this need as the major world religions have known of the importance of *sanctuary* for millennia.

Tradition is a powerful image. It is a deep symbol, a god-word, that is embedded in our sense of self and how one makes sense of the world. Tradition is the quiet voice of the past, nudging us forward and allowing us to collect our bearings. Obversely, if its historical remnants have not survived into the present through anamnestic practices, then humans find it difficult to *not* remake their own traditions and fill the gap that has been created between where we were, where we are, and where we are going. Given that tradition was apparent across all three informants, one can confidently propose that the abandonment of tradition in our post-Christian world is not nearly as complete as those who think they have accomplished it. The past haunts all of us, and were it not so, it is unlikely we'd even be the people we are.

Obligation

Obligation is a god-word that expresses a sense of human relationality that at once connects itself to a deeper tradition of ethics and responsibility than is sensible for folks with modern ears. Farley notes that several other concepts emerge from out of the deep symbol of *obligation*: tradition, responsibility, duty, personhood, interhuman, morality, conscience, right and wrong to name a few.²⁰⁵ These virtues, and senses of commitment to the other, used to be more present in broader culture, but as large and stratified institutions have arisen in culture the value that is obligation, and its many subsets, have been relegated to the realm of the interpersonal and lost widespread currency. As such, obligation exists but it is typically confined in intimate relational units. As Cain once famously responded to God in Genesis 4.9, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is as much a question today as it was for ancient Hebrews. This concept of obligation, and its associated virtues, suddenly sound strange in a world that is uncomfortable

²⁰⁵ Farley, 42.

with a universal moral truth or religious norms that could make demands on one's actions. If Cain asks the proverbial question, one interview participant answers with a post-modern dictum, "we are not looking to be proselytized, we have our own sense of truth."²⁰⁶ What role does obligation have in such a world if, as a concept, it is not part of one's own sense of truth?

What I discovered in the interview process is that obligation is a complex *given* that was embodied by all three participants, some to greater extremes than others. It was an instinct that was *never* the occasion of conscious reflection in any interview. A primary characteristic of obligation is that it suspends the egocentrism of persons in an age of authenticity and temporarily allows higher time to negotiate the secular. The suspension produces a mandate within the person that feels obligated, a feeling that is apart from any written rule or law. This pull toward the other, in a willful act of self-suspension, is a hallmark of this deep symbol that finds freedom in being for the face of the other.²⁰⁷ While many religious persons might direct attention to the founder of their religion as moral exemplar of obligation, obligation doesn't need a specific religious value set to make its appearance. It seems to be a transcendently embedded impression, that grasps and nudges persons out of a deep interhuman need for more than atomism.

As a concept, obligation appeared deeply and across a wide swath of question types: experiential, narrative, and deductive. The following are examples of questions that elicited the concept of obligation:

²⁰⁶ The question that elicited this response was, "If you could say anything to the church writ large, what would you say?" The operative definition of post-modern I use here is from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 31-41.

²⁰⁷ For details on this Levinasian exegesis see Farley, 47-54.

- Do you read books? If so, what sorts of books do you read regularly?
- What sorts of qualities did you look for in a spouse?
- Is there anyone in your life you observed as a child that inspired you into your current field of work?
- If your life was a solar system, what is the sun whose gravity holds all your planets in orbit?
- Can you describe an event that happened in your life that changed your worldview and this change is still a part of your everyday?

The replies to these questions, and several others, made distinct connections to obligatory feelings that pushed one outside their sense of self. In other words, obligation as a deep symbol appeared more widely, and frequently, than any other symbol or signal. One question was of notable importance due to the depth implied in the response. I will give the question, the reply, and then summarize the location of obligation across the other interviews.

Question: Can you describe an event that happened in your life that changed your worldview?

Without a pause, one participant said, “childbirth.” She followed with this reply,

To go from young and wild and doing my own thing, to then suddenly the birth and pain...that I helped make a life and am now in charge of taking care of this life. Love for another creature...A huge part of being human is to have someone else to take care of. I learned what it was to take care of my own, as well as help 40-50,000 people take care of their children through my profession.

The example of motherly obligation should be noted because it is both obligatory *and* loving.

Obligation and love are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they often go hand in hand, as obligation in its purest form is responsibility for the other even to the limit of its own vulnerability, including its murder (loss of life). In this respect, there is no greater deep symbol than the

obligation a mother has for a child.²⁰⁸ The other female participant in this study also shared the obligatory tone of maternal and spousal obligation.

Other forms of obligation noted by participants included the obligation to serve others from out of a deep sense of calling: one a restaurateur and one a lactation consultant. The latter is an instance of a supreme form of responsibility for others who have no direct impact on the life of the caregiver. The caregiver is grasped by a sense of responsibility that supersedes the benefits of social stratification and gives as much as she can even though the task seems impossible. In this sense, *obligation* and *vocation* are closely related, especially if vocation is also toward a suspension of the self in its actualization.

The former is possessed by a sense of calling to nurture others “body and soul” with special attention paid to the younger generations of employees who have no mentors. His obligation is to serve a product he can be proud of, to feed the bodies and warm the souls of customers, and to do so while mentoring the souls of those around him. When younger, his motivation was power and money, but now it is service and relationships. This same participant recalled the deep need he has for a family, for children, and expressed how he had even stayed in a relationship much longer than he should have out of a desire to be a father figure for children who had no father present. To be sure, this commitment could be analyzed deeply but is outside the parameters of this project. What should be noted is his sense of *obligation toward the face of the other*, even the most vulnerable, as a deep symbol active in his life. This obligation was so intense that it was occasion for the suspension of self-realization in a possible future relationship he has always wanted.

²⁰⁸ Farley, 50-52.

Finally, one participant noted that her mother was not a good cook, so as early as 6 years old she was cooking for the family out of a *sense of duty (obligation)*. What six-year-old would feel so compelled? It could be as simple as the child wanting to taste good food or it could be a deep sense that the family needed more than it was receiving. Being grasped by obligation in this form is an intimation she can do no other, even at six years old. By what, and from where, would one be so grasped, and therein, obligated?

These examples do not portray obligation as restraint but obligation as *freedom to be for the other* and *from* ones-self. This deep symbol was intensely present as a transcendent signal that emitted god-like virtues amidst those who may not know such virtues were ever the territory of gods. Even more interesting, while all three subjects possessed the deep symbol of obligation, *not one* ever used the word directly. For persons come of age in the age of authenticity, this omission is not surprising, but neither is its embodiment. The self can often be fractured. The symbol is present, but it is weakening as a cultural language game. As such, there are strong semiotic possibilities within embodied practices that may conjoin the sacred and profane at the intersection of the mysterious connection between *tradition, obligation, and the interhuman* locus of both.

Play

In contemporary language, *play* may immediately conjure images of games or sports. While these forms of play may be included in this category, play is not confined to athletics. Play is a more complex category that includes a sort of dance with the angels than a mere running around basepaths. Play is an everyday experience that establishes a separate discourse, that for a set period, has its own rules quite apart from the rules of the “real” world in which the play happens. As such, it carves out a liminal space alongside the real world, suspending time and

allowing participants to experience a certain transcendence of even their own sense of being and doing. For a few moments, it is no exaggeration to say that time becomes eternity.

The intent of play is always to take a break from the real world and to search for joy. The focus on joy is crucial because play serves a much larger function; when we play, we forget not only our problems, but our ultimate problem: our own death.²⁰⁹ No one considers death when they play, and in fact, even in the face of death many continue to play because play provides an alternative world not grounded in one wherein death has the final word (think the orchestra on the deck of the Titanic or someone writing a book even when they have a terminal medical condition). Play is the active protest of humanity that joy, and not death, has the final word; it gives us access to another *place* alongside the place where we *are*.

The important thing is that while this may have mystical elements, it is not mystically derived. It is inductive, but it is also incarnate. Play is an intentionally engaged act. Yes, play does provide a break from reality, but *why* is a break even necessary? What does one *need* that only a form of play provides? The intention is to gain access to *what is beyond* the play, to what is experienced *in* it, and thereby to a supernatural sort of vindication of joy over death and a sense of wholeness that serious time cannot provide. Ultimately, play leads to a *transcendent* joy; it leads to a place of fulfillment, peace, and exuberant unity to what is only accessible through it. It is simultaneously a primordial, and contemporary, human expression, and to neglect such a large part of the human experience as indicative of inductive faith and transcendence is to turn play into an editorial on a sports page instead of seeing it for the poetic action that it is.

²⁰⁹ Berger, 57-59.

Play is also a strongly anthropological category that is best described through its expression. Of all the deep symbols and signals ascertained in this study, play was the most frequent *conscious* signal (act) that was performed. There was, in fact, something that satisfied a deep need in acts of play. To investigate this signal of transcendence as naturally occurring phenomena, it was important to avoid asking a direct question about play as a subject. Instead, I let the following two experiential questions lead participants to their own narratives:

Question: Can you describe a time when you lost track of time? What happened? What were you doing?

Question: What, if any, relationship do you have with music?

Replies to the former question provided intimations that the second question may be one to incorporate into all interviews. Thus, all three participants were asked about music. The forms of play that were most salient for all three participants were expressive of not only specific actions but of feelings, suspensions of time, and access to an otherness, that was not granted in normal time. These forms of play included listening to music, playing music, gardening, and cooking.

Music was a notable act of play because of its seemingly religious connotations. It was a magical portal whereby something was keenly *felt*, and accessible, but was unable to be spoken. Music didn't always have this effect, but there were instances wherein *more* than music took place and the forward movement of death and despair in life was suspended. The passionate way in which music was described, and the regularity of its engagement, provided intimations of a liturgy. Thereby, this signal was entangled with the deep symbol of *tradition* and served as a sort of sacramental act that allowed participants a foretaste of heaven. Note the compelling way music was described by one participant:

Music is introspective for me. I am drawn to the tonally spiritual music. Someone's lyrics the other night, got me, written by Jackson Browne whom I have never appreciated. It

was kinda old people music, even when we were kids our super hip grandparents would have listened to. But it got me, and I listened to that song for 2 hours straight. Dude on piano singing a song that he wrote 40-50 years ago, with perfect tone and inflection. I sat for 2 hours, and I lost it, I cried for 2 hours, in that moment you are all In your feels.²¹⁰

In this instance note the suspension of time. Hours went by as he was captured in this transcendent moment. He paused and forgot where he was. This play took him somewhere else in the face of his own human limits.

I also learned in the discourse about music that he played guitar. I inquired about when his relationship to music started. He noted that he had been drawn to music at 4-5 years of age and that as he matured, he began to write his own. Coincidentally, the arrangement of our interviews happened to intersect at a time he was being intentional about being playful after work with his guitar, staying up until 2am each night playing. Then he made this notable statement about *why* he plays and *what* playing has the potential to do:

I have not written music since was 17, but last week I wrote again. Music allows you to transcend yourself. Redirect. A state of zen that is created when you are trying to nail a certain lick, or feel a chord progression, or get something on paper...make all that happen at one time...there is no thought of anything else. There is Nothing else in my life that I am able to do that with. When I am in the zone, it is a suspension of time.

These are critical examples of play. In earlier interviews, this participant expressed a deep hope and longing similar to the expressions of the song he heard and in the music he chooses to play. Music is a playful retreat, and expression, from that oppressive personal and emotional longing that haunts him. In the face of existential angst, what could be interpreted as an emotional Titanic

²¹⁰ Music as a journey into feelings, and away from the real world, was a strong theme in another participant as well. I asked if she had to choose only one form of art to enjoy for the rest of her life, what would it be? Emphatically she stated music was a *need* of hers. In particular, she noted the importance of live shows as “an experience” and that songs “take her back to other places in time.” If sacrament is defined as conduit of grace and mediator of otherness, then this description of music as play is borderline sacramental. From the *nothing* she runs into music.

that is buoyed by Hope (to be discussed below) he turned to play in his quest for joy and to say “no” to death and despair as final word.

Play was also expressed as an act of cooking. The act of being with others, assisting others, preparing for others, and participating in something that connected them with their past suspended time and provided a regular sense of joy. When I asked a participant the context in which she often loses track of time, she quickly replied:

This usually happens when I am in my kitchen...barefoot in my kitchen cooking. Get caught up in something I really enjoy, cooking and gardening, or decorating cakes. Hours and hours go by, and I don't realize, and I don't even care.

Note the language of enjoyment in cooking and this language of “caught up” that is eerily like the notion of being grasped within *tradition* or by *obligation*. The fusion of time and eternity is also present in this description as seconds, minutes, and hours become blurry. The mysterious character of play and its transcendent qualities are tacit in confessions like the above.

A similar feeling was expressed by another informant that noted she cooks “to connect with the past.” She said she “intentionally cooks things her mom would have cooked as a means of *re-remembering* her” and will go to her kitchen to engage in purposeful time-travel when death no longer separated them. In this way, cooking is an intentional playful act that led to the joy of good memories and a sense of belonging/home, which stands in stark contrast to the distance between there, and here, that separates us from the dead and reminds us of our own impending demise.

The above descriptions and examples disclose that there is much more going on in playful acts than the mere act of playing. Mindful playing is not the wasting of time. Its actualization are the places in history where the divine and human meet phenomenally. Play is

our means of protest, an essential aspect of human being because it allows us to temporarily experience what it must be like to see behind the curtain of time and eternity.

Damnation

The deeds that cry out for hell, and reach out to heaven for justice in hell, concern us here. Peter Berger provides a salient description of this transcendent signal, “There are certain deeds that cry out to heaven...deeds that cry out to heaven also cry out *for* hell.”²¹¹ The signal of damnation refers to an event, or events, that happen to us, or in our world, that immediately provokes a visceral response of impossibility. The act is so impossible, it seems, that its performance/occurrence is monstrous. Without any prior religious or theological underpinnings, it is something that when we see it the only reasonable response is one of damnation because only God could right such a terror filled wrong. In a word, the condemnation takes on the status of a universal *Truth*, capital T. The human code of law, no matter how rigorously judgmental, fails to give any peace-filled judgment in these instances. Justice doesn’t seem to be enough.

To be sure, there are certain socio-historical analysis that would seek to explain away such acts. Such monstrous and evil acts can be attributed to social conditions or cultural norms, but these sorts of acts are of such a character that such an excuse requires *effort* to perform them because the initial human response in the face of this evil is to suspend such relativization. The important part is not how evil can be explained away, but the *character* and *intention* of the immediate condemnation that we share.²¹² This immediate response is of a theological nature since it is religion that provides a context for such a reaction. To be justified in damning or

²¹¹ Berger, 67.

²¹² Ibid., 65

condemning something as “wrong,” without any logical persuasion, is a remnant of a time when certain values still had roots in theological ground and conditioned human sensibilities.

To discern where this transcendent signal may emerge in interview participants, I wanted to ask the question about damnation without asking it. What I was looking for was a reaction to something that when at first seen, was interpreted as heinous, apart from any religious moorings to lead to this conclusion. The example Berger gives in his text of monstrous evil were the war crimes committed against humanity by Nazi Germany. Rightly, this evokes a visceral response. This project, however, wouldn't necessarily discover anything so heinous in participants, but this was not the goal for this line of questioning. The goal was, *first*, to explore damnation or condemnation as a concept in the mundane of life and, secondly, to see *if*, and *where*, there was a reaction against an evil so striking that one need not know the Ten Commandments to determine its character as damnable or wrong.

I share as evidence of this transcendent signal responses from two participants. Recall, one was raised in a religiously fundamentalist home, but never shared a confession of faith and from 12 to 50 years old has been outside the confines of institutional religion. As an aside, the children she raised became atheist and agnostic, yet here is her reply. I posed the question as follows:

Question: Can you describe an event that the first time you heard about filled you w/ legitimate shock and horror?

Reply: When we were in Utah in the Mormon church, we were called to a service where the preacher told us God told him to take a second wife. The woman he named, however, was married to another man. They announced this. This was how this is going to be. Period. This was one of the most shocking moments of my life. I knew that was wrong, not right...but I was 12. I wondered if would be told to be someone's wife? The shock that someone with power can take something away. There are things you just know aren't right: killing people and taking someone's wife is one of those things.

In follow up mini-tour questions of this incident there was never any moral instruction for, or against, this sort of religious malpractice. Yet at such an impressionable age she recoiled at the evil power on display, and as an adult, she equated taking the wife of another man to the same sort of act as murder: reflexively damning and wrong. She expressed the sense that what belongs to someone else: property, belongings, people, should not be violated. The locus of her morality was placed in this interhuman dimension even though she had no moral instruction to guide her here.²¹³ There can be no doubt that the sight of another human having the power to terminate marital law, and thereby take another person as an object of desire, is indeed a damnable evil.²¹⁴

This same question posed to another participant, invoked a similarly horrifying sexual reply. She did not use a personal example but did use an experience not uncommon in one of her hobbies: horror films and the oft included rape scene. She said the very act of witnessing rape makes her feel gross, dirty, and she wants to bath after she has witnessed them cinematically. She went on to describe with disgust Rob Zombies *Halloween* and talked about the rape scene that is exclusive to the “Directors Cut.” She noted that “the rape scene has nothing to do with anything, serves no plot points. I cannot. It makes me feel sick and gross.” She went on to say, thankfully, most scenes like that can be avoided now adays with advance previews. For many in our culture, the barriers between offense and entertainment are often blurred, the popularity of

²¹³ Farley, 21.

²¹⁴ This example is not an argument against polygamy. While I find the practice troubling, there is no place to debate that issue here. This example is a testament to the initial reaction of a twelve-year-old girl apart from all religious instruction in the affirmative, and to her fifty-year-old self, who still recalls this tragic memory.

the *Saw* movies being exemplary in that regard, but for this participant there is nothing more offensive than witnessing a rape.

A common thread, even with the participant I did not list, was the important role that sexuality signified in one's sense of moral recoil and damnation. Sexuality goes to the core of human identity. Violations, confiscations, and abuse of sexual relationships are visceral acts that bring out the worst cases of judgment against others. One need only recall the recent "Me Too" movement and the myriad sex scandals that have rocked the political and entertainment world in the recent past such as Harvey Weinstein or Jeffrey Epstein.

What causes such universal condemnation when sexuality is abused and the *other* violated in an act of sexual violence or obfuscation? Sexuality is precisely the one thing we all have that should only be accessible at our choosing. Even then, what we possess sexually is still, to a degree, not even fully accessible by us. It represents a deep interiority of the human being that is theirs and theirs alone: sexuality is the realm of the gods. To *know* it is to know the person. To find that a temporal reality can somehow be granted access, via sheer power, over something so infinite and immeasurable, and yet extremely personal, is to stand aghast before the reaches of human evil.

Finally, unlike Berger's global example of the Holocaust, each of my participants listed either personal *experiences* or a personal *feeling* with events of a sexual character. None of them discussed a global sense of evil or a detached example. This is telling: the sense of self is more regulative than global or national events, at least as far as distinct memories of evil go. One's *experience of phenomena* matters more than one's knowledge of the experience of others. We are all limited to, and biased, toward our bodies. One could think of events such as 9/11, school shootings, or sex trafficking, as ontologically evil acts. Instead, personal experiences were more

impressionable than events in the world writ large. Yet each participant had an example of an evil, quite apart from any theological reason, that they knew was real when experienced or seen. Such examples are signals of transcendence that make even the most humanist among us condemn them without question, and in many instances, issue edicts of damnation.

Hope

When religious persons hear the word “hope” it often conjures images of life everlasting, the heavens above, the *final* healing of all that is broken. The misery of today is vindicated in the hope of tomorrow or eternity. Multiple temporal wrongs are held within the context of a greater eschatological right. Even smaller everyday hoping is merely a subtext for this grander vision. However, this impression of hope fails to encapsulate how this deep symbol functions within non-religious persons. The larger objective eschatological sense of hope does not have the final say on the concept, but neither do the subjective inklings of mundane hoping that, on the face, seem to reduce hope to emotive whims.²¹⁵ Hope is the place where objective sense, meets subjective force, to construct and believe in a reality that makes life both bearable and worth living. It is an embedded part of human fabric that grounds specific actions but also takes concrete form from out of its own framework.

Farley identifies the locus of hope within a community, “Hope is something at work in a community and it arises in individuals as they partake in that.”²¹⁶ Hope is at home within

²¹⁵ Farley does an admirable job grounding hope in the individual/community but fails to acknowledge the remaking of hope by secular people, which is a religious act and an individual longing that desires more than self-satisfaction. Hope, as a functional concept, is not unlike a realized eschatology. None-Religious persons are not waiting for a cosmic event, but they are also aware that their deep hopes transcend themselves and tap into something *real*.

²¹⁶ Farley, 98.

persons, but it is also the result of communal aspirations. People, and groups of people, hope. In addition, it is also the place where community and individual come together, if not for the sake of originating community but possibly to create a *new* communal reality, which is what happens apart from ecclesiastical communities. Therein, individual, and communal hoping are welded. Without a community it is questionable whether hope can exist. Likewise, without an individual in which hope can reside, it is questionable whether communal hopes could ever be actualized considering that to hope is also to act, either by will or by state of being.²¹⁷

Further paradoxes follow. Hope is often strongest when the outlook of life is most dire; when the world looks the bleakest, hope shines the brightest. Precisely when it should be negated, it is realized.²¹⁸ This sense of hope can often be the fiercest in the face of death, with people praying through their persuasion of hope. We have all witnessed a friend whose hope often grows strongest in the face of the death of a loved one. But death need not be characterized as biological end of life. Death can include any sense of loss, real or perceived. When marriages are on the verge of dissolution, one often hopes the deepest for their healing. When future relationships look allusive, regardless of reason, hope often provides deep purpose and resilience. When our children seem to be overtaken by slothfulness, or substance abuse, or bad influences, hope takes a stronger footing in parents. For religious groups, when the world looks bleak eschatological hopes are seeming impassible. Farley summarizes these sentiments, “because we hope in the midst of hopelessness, hope is never trivial.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Farley, 100-101.

²¹⁸ Interestingly, the Book of Job was noted as an example of this by one participant.

²¹⁹ Farley, 99.

Lastly, hope is not passive. It is both waiting and the action of waiting. Human actions within hope can often prepare the way for the *hoped for*. The realization of hope is never guaranteed. Despair and depression are options in dire situations, yet when one embodies hope, one does not live as if there is no hope. Steps are taken to condition the mind and heart in hopeful ways, and to lean into the future that is the destination of deep human longing. As such, not only is hope an active waiting, but it is also a disposition within circumstance that can transcend one event and become a prevailing sentiment in individual persons across the landscape of life's challenges.²²⁰ This aspect of hope becomes a structural part of the human psyche; it becomes a regulative psychological state that proves useful time and again since the only certainty in life is eventual loss.

In interviews with participants, hope was an emotional category, and emerged in the face of loss, death, and despair. The intense life experiences in which these persons were, and are, filled with hope, were revelatory as to the deeply penetrating power of this symbol and its signaling to more than material circumstances. The ideas of *home*, *relationships*, *belonging*, *survival*, and *wisdom* were all smaller embodiments that emerged in discussions. The thread that held these together, however, was the idea of the interhuman. Hope was *never* divorced from others. Not one participant hoped for the frivolities of wealth, power, or a different political regime. When hope emerged, it did so within deep human intimation and was filled with emotion, and in *every* instance, what was described in hope was something that could not be attained by sheer will. In a word, the employment of hope was the recognition of transcendence.

I begin with a discussion of hope and relationships. I posed the following:

²²⁰ The paradoxes noted above: hope/hopelessness, active/waiting, particular/general, are all noted by Farley.

Question: If your life was a solar system, what is the sun whose gravity holds all your planets in orbit? What keeps everything moving, the axis, around which it all revolves?

Reply: The Sun is the good woman that holds my system in place I have been sober for 4 years and a quarter. I knew I was never going to have that thing which I wanted most if that was a part of my life.

This reply was a stunning admission and was not preceded by any discussions of hope. In fact, the preceding question was about influences in child and adulthood. When he replied with an answer about work, and how he had come to this point in his life, I thought a good pivot toward value systems was appropriate. Then, came this reply. More than any other past, or current human influence, his single *largest guiding feature was a hope for a relationship* that would offer him a sense of fulfillment as a person. I did not get the sense that this was a shallow desire for marriage; his tone and inflection gave this confession an Edenic quality. He is actively shaping his life in such a way to prepare it for a companion he knows he *needs*. Thus, hope is active and waiting, within him. This man is a business owner, quite intelligent, and well spoken, yet the thing that keeps his planets in orbit is the *hope* of what will be with someone else. In this way, hope is both the disposition through which he acts and that which determines his actions.

I followed this with mini-tour questions. If this was his hope, how did he understand the concept of home?

Question: What does the image of HOME connote for you?

Reply: A group of people that you return to when your day is done.

Question: Does a home exist where there are no people?

Reply: There is no home without people.

This powerful, poignant, exchange revealed that the participant hoped for home. It wasn't about the relationship. It was about being homeless at 42 years old. This was evident when we talked

about holiday observances and the ordering of everyday life. When I asked him about such, his reply was “well, holidays aren’t much different from regular days when you are single.” The theme of finding a home and finding it with others was not a subjective frivolity. It was a deep symbol also embedded in his understanding of families and their purpose (i.e., *tradition*). During the same conversation he noted that his grandparents were not divorced and that his grandfather had an impeccable work ethic. The Promised Land for this participant was a place that would one day arrive if he continued its preparation. It is a place where he will one day wipe tears from his eyes, share life with someone that would be loyal, and be at home with him, much like what he observed growing up with his grandparents. He was tired of sleeping beneath an overpass.

A similar expression of hope was expressed from another participant following a different line of questioning.

Question: Can you describe an event that happened in your life that changed your worldview?

Reply: Divorce. I was madly in love, and he was not. I realized that you have no idea what is in the head of someone else. Me and my son did it alone thereafter.

We went on to have a discussion of further lessons learned and how she coped with this abrupt change. She mentioned her many attempts to numb the hurt, the many people she met, and the breakdown of order that ensued after the divorce. As the conversation continued, I was able to ask her about qualities she was looking for in a spouse, how her home was different than that of her raising, and her understanding of family. We even discussed her favorite novels and the characters she was drawn toward. Her responses to these now were a direct result of this change in worldview. After her divorce, a unique sort of death, she was left trying to reconstruct a life from out of the ashes. She had negative examples in her rearview mirror, so whatever the future held it must hold the opposite of the past.

While she never used the language of hope, it was evident that if hope was not operative, she could have easily despaired. Her hope for a home is a direct result of the place that hope has played in ordering her life.²²¹ And like the first example, home is space, but more importantly, it is space with people who accept you²²², support you, and can provide a sense of safety and belonging. Metaphorically, her divorce left her homeless. She spent the ensuing years living in a homeless condition, but the grief of that loss gave way to hope. She was remiss to find support or acceptance for who she was. She needed a place to belong and believed that one day it would arrive even though life chuckled at her efforts. Thus, in this instance, hope was interpreted as an important concept at work within her, even though she never gave voice to the idea in language. Her *life is the text*, and the text told the story of something transcendent; it told the story of hope.

Lastly, one participant exuded hope via the endurance of wisdom. This was akin to what Berger expressed as a time when hope was strictly communal in orientation.²²³ This participant also expressed the concept of hope via survival, but we will limit our discussion to wisdom for this last illustration. We were talking about her work as a lactation consultant and its impact on others. Here is someone that works with new mothers every day; she sees new life every day. Might she ever despair that new life is being brought into a globe that is interdependent to an unprecedented level, with increasingly complex global problems, and a social fabric in this country that seems to be tenuously fraying. So, I asked,

²²¹ This participant's physical living space (home) was described above in the sanctuary example.

²²² Her favorite books to read are Jane Austin novels. Not surprisingly, the characters she most identifies with are the outcasts.

²²³ Berger, 61.

Question: Considering the world we live in, and all the negativity and uncertainty, how does that make you feel for expectant mothers and their children?

Reply: I often look at newborn babies and think ‘well, there is the hope of the future.’ That there are people, at least for those who planned their pregnancy, that have enough hope in tomorrow that they are willing to PLAN a family for it, for them. Who would have a family if they didn’t have hope for the world to come? And we still have love. I am hopeful that the wisdom I can impart will carry over to the next generation.

It is difficult for even the most resilient among us to continue to hope in a world with so much perceived and experienced negativity. There are so many crises and so few who seem intent to help solve them. She admitted that, at times, she wonders if her work is worth it, if she will be remembered, if her wisdom will take root, yet that agnosticism is not strong enough to paralyze her. She believes in her work, and its impact on mothers and children, more than on what seeds fall onto stony ground. At 50, she confessed that she has acquired wisdom that needs to be shared and she continues to share in *hopeful* expectation that it will change the lives of those around her. This is much more than hoping it won’t rain. One key thing to notice is that hope is not grounded in the realm of ideas; hope is not esoteric. It is grounded in the place of its deposit: other humans, their offspring, and a yet uncreated future. This is cosmic in significance and transcendent in value as it can span even the longest of human lives. To hope, is to hope for the world and others. To act because of that hope is faith.²²⁴

As a researcher, I was unsure where hope would emerge or if it was an operative concept in the same way that it is for religious persons. What I discovered was that not only is this symbol entangled with other symbols, but like *tradition* above, it is in the process of being remade, and embodied, toward different ends than that of a religious persuasion even if what is hoped for is made fertile in fallow theological ground. The irony is, however, that all hope takes

²²⁴ Hebrews 11.1 “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

material form. *Not one* participant hoped for anything immaterial or metaphysical. This holds as true for the grand hope of a humanity that employs our wisdom as it does for the hope that our individual lives lead us to fulfillment with others. The world is composed of a plurality that is not reduced to an individuality. Individuality is not powerful in and of itself unless it influences its world.

As with all history and human phenomena, hope is a condition of existence. Even grand eschatological hope is unrealized for the living, let alone what can be said for the already dead. In this way, I discovered that the concept of hope was quite Hebraic in its function: what is hoped for is not a land far away in a disembodied place where all wrongs are made right. What is hoped for is a Promised Land, if you will, wherein life can be lived in peace, love can be experienced to the fullest, and the generations after us walk past the stones of our memories with boldness into the great unknown that is our collective future.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature, so understanding the *depth* of limited human experience was the primary goal, especially in relation to inconspicuous semiotic domains. This was a deep dive into a few participants to write their lived experiences in relation to signals of transcendence. However, a study with a larger population base may have provided insights into other signals, their rate of occurrence, and the sorts of experiences in which these phenomena were more salient. Regardless, the quality of the information discovered in this research is sound even if it not as expansive as some readers may find compelling.

The best sociology or anthropological theorizing is one *from out of* a shared experience of researcher with her subjects. The glaring limit of this thesis, then, is that I could not *live* with the

participants. The study is limited to the degree that it did not observe its subjects in the wild and had to presume that confessions, or interview narratives, were accurate portrayals of embodied practice. This weakness was partially overcome by sharing a broader culture (an American Secular/pluralistic one) via reflexive emic practice.

These being the primary methodological weaknesses, there are a few concluding operational weaknesses that should be stated. First, participants being aware that this study was a religious study of sorts could have conditioned their responses. On occasion I did intimate that this was the case and felt like they were attempting to lead me. I would typically dismiss these sorts of leadings and ask probing questions for which there was no presupposed information. Secondly, I could have extended the participant criterion to include no religious elements in their raising whatsoever to get as pristine of a secular picture as possible. All candidates met the criteria initially established and stated above, but it was clear that *any brush* with religion in early childhood did make one more religiously sensitive. I had not considered this as a potential setback, whereas I knew that a former Christian would have obvious religious haunts. Lastly, the study could have been strengthened had I been able to include a participant of another ethnicity or sexual preference.

Weaknesses noted, this method also had some notable strengths. Spradley's method of contrast, narrative, and experiential questioning was insightful. Beginning interviews with a grand-tour question and then inductively allowing those responses to lead to further explorations via mini-tour questions allowed for a fluid movement in the interviews that made the conversations feel natural. There were no awkward moments to overcome by this novice ethnographer. The strength of this method was reinforced when, at the inception of my first interview, I saw the limit of deductive questions for qualitative research. When I recognized a

deductive approach led to truncated replies, I embraced Spradley's method fully and leaned heavy into Berger's sense of inductive faith. As such, the process taught me to ask qualitative touring questions that made the project stronger than originally conceived. Further, Spradley's questioning resisted participant attempts to feed me answers and required more of their creative power to engage their own sense of self and daily practice.

As a study grounded in anthropology, it was less threatening to participants. They knew the goal was to learn from them, not proselytize them. Coming to them from within secular method allowed participants a level semiotic field. They knew I was not there to argue about religion (which had a unanimous negative vibe for all participants) but to honestly learn from them. Grounded in phenomenology, this study was intensely interested in the *feeling* incased within experiences of the mundane. It was important to discover not only how life was lived, but how they felt while living it, feeling and action being co-dependent states. Ethnography as a method allowed the researcher to listen intently and write expressively. Lastly, this thesis was strengthened by an acute reflexive awareness on the part of the researcher to write what he learned as a means of producing an intensified taxonomy that can provide semiotic conjunctions between church and culture.

Haunted by Transcendence

To be haunted is to be pursued by something other than oneself. The pursuit is not a secretive arrangement. It occurs in the routine events of life: going to the grocery store, listening to music, making love, or coming home from work. It happens when we put our hands in dirt, cry while cooking, and wonder what it all means. There is no place from which one is hidden from the haunting presence of being grasped by something greater than ourselves. The Psalmist felt the same way several millennia ago, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee

from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.”²²⁵ Perhaps the participants in this study would not be as certain as the Psalmist that this something is the Lord, the God of Israel, but there is certainly an ineluctability that presses from the inside out.

This study demonstrated the powerful presence of signals of transcendence and deep symbols as contributing value sets for individuals that do not share the theological presuppositions from which those signals emerge. For all participants, personal experience was the arbiter of action and the giver of wisdom, yet many commitments (concepts) were granted *a priori* status apart from any empirical justification. Appeals were made to immaterial concepts such as loyalty, honesty, love, and feelings. On more than one occasion, each participant confessed to being overtaken by experience itself. By *what* were they overtaken? Themselves? How does one survive a childhood from hell? From where does perseverance come? How does modern empiricism warrant hope when all seems hopeless? The only answer to these sorts of questions is that there are structural elements of the human experience, grounded in theistic days of yore, that have remained with moderns no matter how scientific or humanist we have become. While one might be reluctant to name it anything more concretely than Hegel’s universal spirit, one must name it, even if that name is as one participant confessed, “I don’t know what it is, but there’s something.” Instantly, one is now back with Moses at the sight of the Burning Bush. We hear it, we see it, we feel it, we experience it. What do we call it? It just “is” or in biblical parlance, “I Am.” Much is in a name and much reside in our words. It is. We are.

²²⁵ Psalm 139.8

CHAPTER 5

LANGUAGE AS AT-ONEMENT

What kind of Truth are we talking about? Not a kind that may be logically demonstrated, that may be scientifically proved, that may be calculated. It is a matter of a truth “we stumble upon,” to which I cannot not adhere, that totally, fatally, subjugates me, that I hold for vital, absolute, indisputable: *credo quia absurdum*. A truth that keeps me, makes me exist. Rather than being an idea...might it be an experience?²²⁶

Developing a Language: A Semantics for Missiology

This project thesis proposed to achieve three goals. First, it proposed to determine the points at which Peter Berger’s signals of transcendence and Edward Farley’s deep symbols occur in the lives of non-religious persons. Given the evidence of our interview processes, this goal was firmly established, and examples provided. Secondly, it proposed to demonstrate that the presence of such signals imply that the lives of Nones are more than empty immanent frames of reference. The passionate descriptions of the participants of this study are testimonials that while immanence may be closing in, it does not have the final say; there is *an unseen tug for more*. This study suggests that immanence is often suspended as participants were enraptured in events, busy organizing their homes, and relating to others. Lastly, the project proposed to lay semiotic foundations that might help mediate the construction of a missional practice within a local church community that takes seriously the reality that transcendence can be mediated in everyday secular experience as demonstrated in the lives of Nones. This final object was achieved through the development of our own intensified taxonomy of deep symbols.

The study confirmed, extrapolated, and articulated, newer arenas in which transcendent value sets are as deeply embedded in the non-religious secular person as they are in admittedly

²²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

religious persons. To effectively communicate across cultural boundaries, even inside a culture of different values, establishing a common language is paramount. Through the mining of transcendent signals and deep symbols, this thesis is attempting to provide a common language game through which a biblical or religious framework can communicate effectively with a secular framework occupying the same geography. Like our pluralistic world, it can be frustrating not speaking the same language as someone who just moved next door or who is trying to offer a service in public; Understanding can remain elusive. Likewise, the church cannot understand secular, or non-religious culture, through assumption;²²⁷ it can only do so by learning the language. Languages are more easily learned when one discovers there may be something the new language shares with our native one. This applies to both the signals of language and the concepts through which languages (and therefore lives) are built.

Language builds worlds, but more importantly, one's actions are indicative of the language games that are played in a culture. Language is structuring but is not limited to speaking; it is also a means of organizing, relating, using symbolic gestures, acting, idealizing, and observing. Language creates a narrative in which the stories we tell ourselves become the stories we inhabit; unspoken language becomes the givens with which we organize life and determine what matters. Thus, what is spoken, and incarnated, are viable means for determining the perpetual haunting of the West by something greater than itself. By establishing latent presences of transcendent categories as value sets and linguistic signals that organize mundane life, one can identify places of deep convergence between those who are explicit believers and

²²⁷ For an excellent critique of anecdotal descriptions of church and culture, and advocacy for ethnography as a means of establishing what's real, see Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions" in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 182-199.

those who are not. Furthermore, not only are we identifying common value sets, but it is the identification of *operative constructs* apart from which life looks vastly different.²²⁸

In other words, *tradition* matters. *Obligation* matters. *Play* matters. These concepts are shared means of living life for both the religious and the secular person, even though one group grounds them in a religious framework while the others do so through an empirical one. These are embedded thumbprints of a time when the divine's hands were more clearly identified. Thus, transcendent signals and deep symbols provide deeply embedded value sets whereby the religious and secular may comingle in practical and dialogical ways. As we saw in our biblical examples above, the Psalmist and Paul did not engage culture by speaking past it, but through *shared* commitments, shared language. Therefore, transcendent signals provide a capstone by which two disparate domains, the religious and the secular, may come together. Ironically, if one should leave the capstone and go down any side of the arch that it constructs, one will find both columns proceed from the same ground. For the contemporary church to take seriously its missiological mandate of sharing the gospel, it must first learn how to speak the language of its context. Transcendent signals provide a means of doing so because they establish a shared means of doing life.

²²⁸ Kristeva, 12. While this thesis' focus was on the discovery and embodiment of transcendent signals in the mundane as a connection to higher times of transcendent, i.e., religious value sets, Julia Kristeva proposes a pre-religious sentiment that is imbibed with the need to believe. Anthropologically it appears if humans are anything they are *things* that believe. Citing the development of individuation from out of Freudian theory, she notes that allowing "a more complex understanding of the psychic apparatus, reveal how much the need to believe is part and parcel of the speaking subject "before" any strictly religious construction and of course within secularization itself."

A Taxonomy of Deep Symbols

One of the most significant results of this research was the resultant intensified taxonomy predicated on the initial taxonomy of Berger and Farley. They provided concepts through which I was able to gather my bearings in the storied worlds of the participants. They provided me a “lay of the land” as I was about the process of listening, auditing, and indexing observations.²²⁹ This taxonomy is of pivotal importance because it intensifies as it moves from broader categories to narrower forms of embodiment. The discovery of these embodied forms of signals and symbols are the things from which a semiotic foundation and a local theology may begin to be constructed because they are localizable expressions of otherwise esoteric concepts; they are the world of ideas become the world of life. I suspect my religious readers who share a confession of faith may find significant overlap between these embodiments and their own lives. The taxonomy offered in Appendix F is not absolute, but it was constructed from out of the most noteworthy expressions of participants and gives the best arial perspective of the large amount of data collected.

The taxonomy should be understood as beginning with the larger categories of Berger and Farley. From there, one can see the interpretive moves I make from storied practice, grounded within deeper symbols and transcendent signals, to smaller expressions of these symbols. It is one thing to say that the symbol of obligation is a notable signal, but what does that look like? What does it look like to suggest *play* is a transcendent signal that testifies to a larger reality that constitutes a necessary part of the human being? These smaller expressions provide some answers to these sorts of questions. They are what signals look like when

²²⁹ Johnson, 66-80.

embodied across various categories. Thus, the taxonomy represents semiotic layering that moves from language to practice, a place within which church and culture (sacred and secular text) can engage because they are shared expressions of humanity.

Local theologies: Home - Root Metaphor, Incarnation as Imperative

In his seminal missiological text, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Robert Schreiter explains how metaphors can hold together entire semiotic domains. I propose a major finding of this project is that *home* is *the* root metaphor that binds the semiotic domains of deep symbols and transcendent signals into intelligible expressions of life. This needs further exploration, but a brief defense of this statement and its potential for further study can be offered.

Metaphors occur when two discrete signs are identified with each other and brought together to express a deeper meaning in both signs. For example, Jesus as the bread of heaven is a metaphor. Jesus is not bread and bread is not Jesus, but when brought together they inform the nature of Jesus' activity and his place of origin. Thus, when two signs are brought together in this way, they communicate more together than they do apart. Schreiter reminds us that metaphors are "central to the functioning of culture texts, especially those culture texts that express in a special way the structures of identity."²³⁰ Metaphors become even more powerful through the metonymic process whereby a part of the sign can depict the whole. Using the example above, when the priest breaks bread over the table at Eucharist, the *bread alone represents* the multiplicity of functions that is Christ to the church and world, yet bread can do this without mention of Christ. This dynamic association creates further possibilities of communicating across the culture within which the metaphor is understood.

²³⁰ Schreiter, 80.

Metaphors merge into semiotic domains when “the complex sign, code, message and metaphoric process spreads itself over an area of culture and brings it together as a constellation of meaning.”²³¹ In other words, the semiotic domain is the habitus of multiple cultural texts and languages games (think embodiments of signals and deep symbols) that are organized together into smaller subsets of activities, which often include metaphors. For example, *obligation* would have its own semiotic domain, so too would the deep symbol of *hope*. They could also exist as part of *economic* or *religious* domains. It is the task of sociology to make these delineations. Metaphors can be a part of domains of meaning; they can also ground them. A domain may be governed by a metaphor, even as it has metaphors within it. For example, marriage could be a metaphor for the domain of obligation. It could be the image that regulates obligatory acts for some cultures. Culture is what happens when multiple semiotic domains come together to express a portrayal of human behavior in a specific time and place.²³²

I propose *Home* as root metaphor from which all other deep symbols and signals flow. Humans are born into a journey not chosen and from our first breath we have no choice but to go *somewhere*. Our being is our forward trajectory. The place to which we are going is *home*. It seems to be a structural propensity to move toward a *place*. The choices one makes and the values one adopts, are intimately linked to going home, eventually. The Christian church has long understood this in its theological developments of eschatology and its concepts of ultimate rest in God. Musical expressions exist in the form of old hymns such as “I Feel Like Traveling On” and “I’ll Fly Away.” Home is more than a concept; it is a deep human need, whether this or that side of eternity. Since this side of eternity leaves so many feeling homeless it only makes

²³¹ Ibid., 80.

²³² Ibid., 81

sense that streets of gold in a land far away carry so much appeal. Likewise, it makes sense that for those of a material persuasion, home is not an ethereal place in the heavens, but a place where they can find rest *before* they die.

Home is the root metaphor that grounds all others, and regulates domains, because of its subtextual connotation of *belonging*. Perhaps more than any other deep symbol or transcendent signal was this need to *belong to ourselves, to a place, and to others*. Many signals found expression in an attempt to belong someplace. It was as if all other signals functioned to move one closer to belonging and home. It may be in ones need to have a home as a sanctuary, in the need to be accepted by others, or in the need to find the relationship that could be our place of rest. Whether it be play, obligation, hope, tradition, or damnation, all functioned to take the participant home or to keep their home intact. The goal of participants may not have been a rest from toil and travail in heaven, but rest from toil and travail were the result of finding one's home and not getting expelled from it as modern-day versions of Adam and Eve.

The incarnation is a valuable theological symbol at this point. Home is where humans are. It is embodied and felt and experienced with others. Of all the existential needs that were noticed in these interviews, all transcendent signals seemed to be employed for the mission of going home to others. The feeling of estrangement and longing for inclusion was encompassing across all candidates.²³³ But that inclusion only meant something if it included others: those with bodies that could be loved, embraced, and offer comfort. There is no inclusion where this is no embrace.

²³³ W. Paul Jones has offered other workable concepts in response to this *obsessio* via the atonement. See his *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), especially theological world one, 45-56.

The incarnation is the theological statement that God is quite aware of this human need, a prerequisite for any act of salvation. The body of God experienced in Jesus is a theological testament that embodiment matters to such a degree that God had to make gods-self available. Humans could not come home to God, or feel at home with God, without a physical manifestation of heavenly embrace. The Gospel of John discloses this divine act in the lifted-up sayings of Jesus. In these sayings, Jesus forebodes his manner of execution and his redemptive act simultaneously, his being “lifted up” on the hill and his arms outstretched on the cross as the embrasure of the world.²³⁴ Only bodies can belong anywhere. So long as being human is connected to having a body, belonging and home will be bound together as an essential human need, if not *the* need, that if not met, creates catastrophic consequences for persons who remain home-less.²³⁵

The Great Commission as Ethnographic Mandate

This projects methodology has also shaped my understanding of mission and witness, so much so that I propose the ancient mandate of the Great Commission be understood as an ethnographic mandate. The churches must shift their understanding of mission from one of *telling* to one of listening, and from one of dictating, to one of writing (which *is* partnering). In other words, this project has led me to believe that if we take the context Charles Taylor describes seriously, or even if we consider Berger’s small objection to be accurate, the contemporary context the church finds itself will only be discerned via the ethnographic process. The quest for transcendent signals has demonstrated that there is much to be found in common

²³⁴ The “Lifted Up” Sayings may be found in the Gospel of John: 3.14, 8.28, & 12.32.

²³⁵ Kristeva, 17-20. She traces the development of the ego to this foundational need to believe in an authority that can name us.

with our secular, non-religious and humanist neighbors, but there is also much that we do not know. We are all human, but we are not the same.

Writ large, the churches are categorically stuck on the Translation or Countercultural model of contextual theology.²³⁶ Conservative evangelistic wings are mostly countercultural and engage culture by being against it, trying to present a spiritual solution to a spiritual problem that many persons in the West do not know they have. The liberal wing of the church, represented by mainline denominations, are either not sure they have a Truth worth sharing or they are so concerned about offending others that their proclamation is timid. In this instance, the Gospel is silenced as a benign notion of love removed from any dogmatic utterances. Surely there must be a middle way since both approaches are predicated on an understanding of the gospel as a countercultural force.

The Western church is truly in an odd place; it is at home in a culture with a vast multitude of people that share some cultural strands but do not share theological frames of reference. It is the ultimate Venn diagram wherein religious and secular frameworks are on the outside of overlapping rings. It is also the perfect context to assume much of our neighbors. The situation is made more complex if one considers that the church is also more secular than it believes because *it is in this culture*. Berger describes the scene admirably,

“For the faith of individuals, the implication of this is simple and exceedingly important. For most, religious believers’ faith and secularity are not mutually exclusive modes of attending reality; it is not a matter of either / or, but rather, both/and. The ability to handle different discourses is an essential trait of a modern person.”²³⁷

²³⁶ Bevans, 31-32.

²³⁷ Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 53.

As such, there are two ethnographic moves that must be made. First, each local church should be understood from out of an ethnographically developed understanding of itself. One cannot make declarative statements such as “the church believes x” or “the church does x.” These statements are only true regarding their local embodiments in real churches. What does this church believe? What do its members believe? What are its practices? Churches must have an ethnographic understanding of themselves before they can even begin to understand others.

Secondly, churches cannot assume what people need, what they believe, or what they do. Each person is different. Each community is different. Contexts are infinitely complex, blending the secular with the plural. To step into any cultural domain and attempt to speak without first knowing the parameters of the domain is haphazard and irresponsible. Neither the Psalmist nor Paul shared the gospel so ignorantly. Too many churches operate under old assumptions of bygone eras in which religion was a perceived solution to personal, spiritual, or emotional problem. Today many perceive religion as a problem, not a solution. These assumptions are then rolled into missional approaches that are stagnant and implemented without any means of communicating to an audience that does not share the same worldview. In other words, the Roman Road may not exist as a means of going anywhere in our cultural moment.

The way forward is through an ethnographic mapping of the world that must begin with Christian professionals, and lay ministers, taking upon themselves the duty of listening, and understanding, before they speak.²³⁸ Ethnography, at its basest, is learning to listen, write, and understand the story of others; it is a faith seeking understanding. We have come to a place in

²³⁸ For an insightful analysis of this post-structural reality see George Yip, “The contour of a post-postmodern missiology,” *Missiology: An International Review* 42. 4 (2014): 399-411.

culture where listening is more important than ever because *nothing* can be assumed. The stakes have never been higher. Ronald Johnson reminds us of its importance,

Learning how to listen will make us better tellers of the gospel. As we learn to listen and develop skills in the art of listening, evangelism can become more natural for us. This is because we will move evangelism from the realm of sales pitch to the realm of human caring and dialogue that meets needs...don't be misled, however. An evangelism based upon listening to others will cause you to invest yourself in the life of another.²³⁹

From a theological perspective, ethnography as mission is the weaving of a theological narrative.²⁴⁰ God is at work; it is the churches task to join God *there* but we must first understand where *there* is and in *what* it is couched. Understanding must precede proclamation in a secular world. Sharing the Gospel will happen along the long road of becoming friends with others, asking more about them than you tell them of yourself, and asking the Holy Spirit to help you see their life as a representation of a culture that is both shared and foreign. This will not be done out of dreadful obligation, but out of love to share what God has done for us.

There are several future areas of study that can be explored to fully implement ethnography as missiological method. First, we should explore the development of pastoral ethnographic techniques that allow the great commission to be slowly embedded in various secular and plural worlds of our congregations. The skills of ethnographic interviewing, writing, and analyzing should be developed into a class for pastors or lay professionals. The class would teach basic interviewing skills and data coding, as well as how to listen and organize materials for assimilation. This class could be developed for local churches, dioceses, or even as continuing education credits for pastors who would like to learn ethnography as missional

²³⁹ Johnson, 80.

²⁴⁰ Moschella, 215-236.

method from pastors knowledgeable in the field. When I shared this idea with a ministry colleague, he was intrigued and told me he would commit funds to do practical continued education with me in person. He saw the results of my work instantly applicable to ministry.

Second, pastors trained in the practice of ethnography could do a study of their own local context as a means of self-understanding before exploring the means of doing mission in their community. It is difficult to be aware of the other when one is not entirely sure of oneself. Third, pastors and church leaders could help establish the need for ethnography in their churches by demonstrating the true lack of real knowledge of those around them. If Taylor and Berger are correct, then the world of Billy Graham is gone and so too are many for whom that message made sense. Indeed, how will they hear if we do not listen? Fourth, I have been invited to do some embedded ministry wherein I could have the opportunity to write an ethnography on the American Spirit, doing ministry at a National Park that sees thousands of visitors a year. This could be used as a means of truly connecting culture and church via a shared language. Lastly, an approach to theology that explores the intersection of ethnography and phenomenology would lend insights into the human experience of the world and ground Christian mission incarnationally.

The Gospel has commanded us to go and make disciples. While our context is not necessarily novel (the early church faced cultural challenges), the contemporary church is coming face to face with sharing the gospel in a world where the pillars of Christendom continue to cascade into rubble. Ethnography is a tool that can be used to understand, write, and communicate with persons that look like us, even share our culture, but reside in a frame we've never seen. As such, the task of sharing the gospel has never been more important or *novel for us*.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Example Grand Tour and Mini-Tour Interview Questions

(Questions framed from out of Peter Berger and Edward Farley's registers)

1. To begin, could you please tell me your age, education level. Did you have a religious upbringing, occupation, and reason you agreed to participate in this study?
2. Can you tell me a little about where you grew up, how you were raised?
3. Do you have a routine? What does your routine look like and how did it take shape?
4. What sorts of things do you look forward to the most? What did your family value the most in your childhood years? What does your family value now?
5. Did you celebrate Holidays as a child? What were they like? Were they meaningful? Why/Why not?
6. Thank you for sharing all this with me. You agreed to participate in this research as someone who identifies as a non-religious person. Is there anything in your childhood or experiences that led you to this position?
7. To begin, can you share with me why are you identify as non-religious? The floor is yours. I'd like to hear your story, any details you'd like to share.
8. Was there anyone or anything that made you non-religious?
9. If you had to describe your life as a movie, or a story you've read, what story is it? Why/how do you connect with this story?
10. Do you believe in Truth, capital T? If so, what is it? How do you locate it? If not, why not?
11. When you say something is beautiful, what do you mean? What is something beautiful?
12. What is your favorite memory as a child? As an adult?
13. Do you have any family traditions? What are they? (follow this path of questions)
14. Would you describe yourself as organized? (Questions that get at order)

15. Describe an event that filled you with shock or horror when you heard about it. What do you think made you feel that way?
16. What does it mean to be a moral or immoral person? Are there things a person can do that is punishable by something as extreme as the death penalty? Why do you believe this?
17. What do you do for entertainment? Can you describe a time when you were so deep in play that you lost track of time, perhaps even track of yourself?
18. What unanswered questions about life do you have? If there is a God, what sorts of questions would you ask God if you could?
19. Can you explain things that make you laugh? What sorts of things bring you joy? Can you explain your feeling of joy or laughter?
20. Do you believe in right and wrong? Do you believe in evil? How do you determine these things?
21. Have you ever had anything happen to you that changed the way you look at life? Did it change how you understand the world?
22. Can you describe a typical day? How does it start, how does it end?
23. What is it that you value most? What reference do you use when making important decisions?
24. What values do you share with your parents? Do you have any values that differ from theirs? From where do your values come?
25. Do you find meaning in nature? If so, what images stick out the most and why? Where is your favorite place in nature to go?
26. With which political party do you affiliate? Why or why not?
27. Do you ever hope for anything? If so, what?

Appendix B: Entrance Interview Assessment

1. Circle one. Are you a Religious or Non-Religious person?
2. Circle one. Were you at one time a practicing religious person and decided to leave your religion? Yes / No. If yes, how long ago?
3. Circle one. Were you raised in a religious home? Yes / No. If yes, did you ever take up the practice of said religion in adolescence or adulthood? Have you raised your own children with a religious piety? Yes / No
4. Circle one. In the event of a marriage, birth, or death of either yourself or a loved one, are you likely to invite a minister of any kind to be a part of that event? Yes / No

Appendix C: Exit Interview Questionnaire

1. Did you feel like you were listened to during this research project?
2. Did you feel the investigator respected you and valued your story?
3. Did you feel like the questions allowed you to express your values as a non-religious person? Did you ever feel tempted to be dishonest in any answer? If so, why?
4. What have you enjoyed most about participating in this project and what have you enjoyed the least? Do you have any recommendations for the interviewer?
5. If there was one thing you would want religious people to know about those who identify as non-religious, what would it be?

Appendix D- Double Blind Sampling Invitation



James and Carolynn McAfee School of Theology

February 19, 2019

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My Name is Nathan Napier and I am a doctoral student at the Mercer University, McAfee School of Theology, in Atlanta, GA. I am currently recruiting participants for my Doctoral Thesis Project titled, "Haunted by Faith: An Ethnographic Study of Signals of Transcendence in Nones." The primary goal of the research is to provide churches and pastors with an understanding of the values of non-religious persons and to demonstrate how non-religious and religious persons may share similar value sets. This research is designed to hear your story, learn from you, and identify clues in the way you tell your story that provide insight into how you make sense of life and how you make meaning.

One of the primary convictions of this research is that all people, religious and non-religious, share values that are a part of our collective human experience. It is these values that connect us as a human community and bind us together regardless of religious creed. Understanding how these common values are experienced in your everyday life will allow this research to develop bridges of communication between religious practitioners and non-religious persons.

To participate in this study, you must: 1.) be of legal adult age 2.) not be a former Christian 3.) self-identify as non-religious and 4.) in all likelihood refuse a ministers help at threshold moments of your life (marriage, births, deaths, etc.). The research will consist of interviews. Each interview session will be approximately 1 hour a week, for 4 weeks, and will consist of guided interview questions to help you share the depth of your experiences. You will be asked to sign a consent form which will outline the parameters of the study and the ways in which your experience will be studied and protected.

If you would like to participate in this research, please contact Nathan Napier at 423-716-5327. We welcome the opportunity to hear your story and learn from you. I hope you will strongly consider sharing a small part of your life with me.

Regards-

Nathan Napier, MDiv

APPENDIX E – Informed Consent



James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology

Haunted by Faith: An Ethnographic Study of Signals of Transcendence in Nones

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators

Nathaniel J. Napier, MDiv., Doctor of Ministry Candidate, Mercer University, McAfee School of Theology
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 678-547-6474. Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Graham R. Walker

Purpose of the Research

This research study proposes to search for, ascertain and identify words of transcendence in the lives of “Nones” that meet the studies criteria. It seeks to explore the following: are there words of transcendence (higher meanings) in the lives of those who identify as non-religious, and if so, how are those signals manifested? This research is designed to study the language and images used by Nones in order to make sense of everyday life experiences and to discover any common ground between religious and non-religious orientations to life.

The data from this research will be used to help the researcher, pastors, and churches to connect and understand None religious persons and their values.

This research will fulfill the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry Degree for the said researcher

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to questions about your life, how you find meaning in life, and to share your of non-religious expressions with someone who wants to learn from your story. The questions asked will allow you to explore your feelings and attempt to understand how you make sense of life and how you embody universal human values. You will be asked to share freely, and openly, without fear of judgment. The interviews are about learning from you through guided questioning and attentive listening.

The investigator will be listening for language that helps him identify how you make meaning and relating certain language or themes to broader language categories.

Your participation will take approximately four weeks. You will be asked to participate in four, 1-hour interview sessions, once per week, in a public setting, such as a coffee shop or restaurant. The researcher will take notes and use an audio recorder. All your information will remain confidential.

The investigator will have a loose format of questioning to begin the interviews, but remains open to the fluid nature of where your story leads

Potential Risks or Discomforts

This research is physically non-invasive, and while there are no foreseeable physical risks, there are emotional concerns to consider. Many individuals have difficulty communicating feelings or expressing ideas. Not all individuals will be comfortable answering every question. Given the sensitive nature of personal stories, participants will be protected, and their emotional states guarded, the following ways.

First, in double-blind selection and snow ball sampling, participants will be told about the project and given opportunity to volunteer. They may decline and not participate if the research does not interest them. Secondly, all participants will be granted anonymity for the purposes of the study. Third, all participants will sign a consent form in which they agree to be recorded via voice memo and the researcher agrees to delete all recordings when the research has been complete. Lastly, the participants will be given the choice to leave the study at any time prior to its conclusion if they feel they are unable to emotionally continue.

Potential Benefits of the Research

A benefit of participating in this study is the participants ability to be heard and understood. This project is about learning and research, but it is also about offering a listening ear to you. As a None religious person, you can communicate your feelings to a field of professionals that can use your story to better help religious people and institutions understand you. Sharing your feelings and values, and allowing your story to be written, can be a way of helping you more completely think through your own value system even as you communicate it to a world of people whom it is often presumed isn't interested in your values.

This study will add to the growing literature of ethnography as research, which could provide an example of how the church can listen to the world around it and how people of faith can listen to those who have much to say to the churches or folks in established religion. Ethnography is simply a word that means "writing your story" and framing all the pieces together so that we can better be understood by others. It will help me as a pastor to learn and embody ethnographic technique as a means of relating and understanding the growing population of those who are non-religious and do not actively engage in a faith community.

This study will allow for the discovery of a common language between Nones and persons of faith. It is often assumed that people outside the church are not religious, or that God is “far from them.” The wider church could benefit from a greater appreciation of the way in which all people embody elements of the divine in their daily lives. The one thing everyone shares is language and listening to your language will help establish common values from which persons of faith can begin to relate non-religious persons.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

To ensure your confidentiality, your name will be shared with no one except the faculty advisor. During the project, you will be given a pseudonym to disguise all identifying markers, both in field notes and audio recording.

All research data will be stored on the investigators personal recording device or in my notebook of field notes. This data will always be kept with the investigator and secured in his office, in a safe, when not in use. All recordings will start with your pseudonym, so that if the data is outsourced for coding your name will remain confidential

The recordings will be used as means of repetitive listening in order to code and organize interview data. It will be used for no other reason but to listen for particular markers and relate those markers to broader anthropological themes. All recording will be destroyed when the project is completed.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Nathaniel J. Napier, at 423-716-5327.

To withdraw from the study, simply notify Nathaniel with a call, specifying your inability to continue in the study. You will be asked to put your withdrawal in writing so that we can move onto alternate participants. This notice can be in the form of email or a physical letter. Please note: Since the data will be anonymously coded, once all data is collected participants cannot withdraw their data from use.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Mercer University, McAfee School of Theology, 3001 Mercer University Dr., Atlanta, GA, 30341. 678-547-6474. Faculty Advisor: Dr. Graham R. Walker

In Case of Injury

It is unlikely that participation in this project will result in harm to subjects. If an injury to a subject does occur, the participant is encouraged to see their medical provider. All expenses associated with care will be the responsibility of the participant and his/her insurance.

Audio or Video Taping

Audio taping will be used but the data gathered will in no way compromise the identity of participants. Audio recordings may be used as verbatim in the body of the project, but anonymity will be maintained.

Reasons for Exclusion from this Study

This research is not clinical in nature. It is sociological, anthropological, and pastoral. You may wish to be excluded from this study if you do not meet the criterion or cannot fulfill the requirements of the study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Research Participant Name (Print)

Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)

Research Participant Signature

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

Date

Date

*Taxonomy of
Deep Symbols*

Obligation	Marriage	Truth teller Support Loyalty
	Service For Others	Cooking Calling Parent
	Work	Provide for family Faithfulness Food Preparation
Law	Morality	Abuse of Power Rape (Evil/Berger) Murder
	Order (Berger)	Scheduling Choas contained Fitting Roles
	Boundaries	Private Property Promiscuity Car Traffic
Tradition	Home	Safety/Security Personal Expression Love
	Community	Inclusive Chosen Non-judgmental
	New Traditions	Thanksgivings Cosplay NewTotem Objects
Real	Music	Emotion Play (Berger) Introspective
	Nature	Child Birth Dirt/seeds Darkness
	Interhuman	Spouses Grieve with others Communal Eating
Hope (Berger/Farley)	Ends	Money Responsible Children Wisdom Imparted
	Relationships	Future Spouse Loved Unconditionally Belonging
	Survival	Humor (Berger) Children Book of Job

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