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Lonely Mystics: A Practical Theological Analysis of Emerging Post-Secular Spiritualities

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Abstract

In 1981, Catholic theologian Karl Rahner wrote about the increasingly lonely experience of the individual seeking an experience of God, a reaction to the continuing decline of church attendance and religious adherence. This prediction echoes today in the emergence of a plethora of spiritual offerings available to individuals outside of religious institutions. This suggests that many are seeking resources for spiritual wellbeing that were previously found or at least anticipated through religious affiliation. Two points of contention between emerging and traditional Christian spiritualities are centered on the locus of authority and the role of community, areas this dissertation explores.

"Spirituality" is emerging in unexpected ways and places, defying widespread predictions of secularization, leading some theorists to refer to this phenomenon as "post-secular" spirituality. This dissertation is a thematic analysis of post-secular spirituality as articulated in recent qualitative studies of the spiritual but not religious, embodied by the story of a composite character. A description of this reality provides a foundation for analyzing two representative understandings of authority and community: a traditional Christian and a post-secular multi-media approach to spirituality. I study these expressions of lived religion as a Catholic practical theologian, interested in how the Spirit of God works to inspire people to new forms of spiritual expression, and how the field of practical theology can enrich and facilitate the cultural conversation.

The understandings of the affiliated and non-affiliated in the areas of community and authority emerge as less distinctive than anticipated. Authority is engaged differently, with post-secular approaches focusing on learning from teachers and developing formative spiritual practices. Temporary communities build around these practices, and they share the characteristic of fluidity with many affiliated religious practitioners who seek relevancy and meaning through changing communities. A consumer-driven, wellbeing approach to spirituality is practiced by both groups, and continues to gain traction. Nuanced understandings of community and authority are actually held by both systems, as they seek a common goal of meaningful living. The potential for transformation lies in the process of respectful and authentic engagement between these differing approaches to the "more" in life.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The believer of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all—if by mysticism we mean, not singular parapsychological phenomena, but a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence. The spirituality of the future will not be supported or at any rate will be much less supported by a sociological homogeneity of its situation; it will have to live much more clearly than hitherto out of a solitary immediate experience of God and God's spirit in the individual. In such a situation the lonely responsibility of the individual in his or her decision of faith is necessary and required in a way much more radical than it was in former times.--Karl Rahner (Adapted from Theological Investigations XX, p. 149, 1981)

In 1981, Catholic theologian Karl Rahner wrote about the increasingly lonely experience of the individual seeking an experience of God, as he witnessed the continuing decline of church attendance and religious adherence. He was not suggesting that people would feel lonely, or that they would be searching for communities or others with whom to share their spiritual quests. He was referring to the already changing nature of the authority of the Church; its credibility and its ability to meet the needs of people in the challenging reality of their lives. As churches continued to lose members for a variety of reasons, including evolving perspectives on commitments to a community, and an unwillingness to cede authority to an institution or a person outside of themselves, Rahner insisted that innately God-given human spiritual longings would endure. The structures, however, would no longer function as they had when the majority of people in the United States claimed affiliation with a religious tradition, and often stayed connected for life. Rahner's prediction of "the lonely responsibility of the individual" in the quest

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for spiritual experience and meaning made over thirty years ago echoes today in the emergence of a plethora of spiritual offerings and approaches available to individuals outside of religious institutions. The very pervasiveness of contemporary spiritual offerings suggests that many people are longing for meaningful lives and are seeking authentic resources to assist them in living to their full human potential in ways that were previously found or at least anticipated through religious affiliation.

As a mother, daughter, teacher and minister, I have heard many variations on the story of children who no longer go to church or engage in the religious practices with which they were raised. These stories are told with sadness, regret and a profound sense that the storyteller somehow failed in their parental responsibilities to pass along the faith to the next generation, as hard as they tried. As the oldest of seven children in a traditionally Catholic family, I have observed this both with my siblings and with my own children. In my immediate family I am the only one for whom religion is still meaningful and relevant, although my critical approach to the institution is very different from the often unquestioned acceptance of everything the faith tradition teaches, held by many in earlier generations. Clearly, there are larger cultural and societal influences at work here, and many factors play a role in creating our contemporary religious and spiritual landscape. Living religious and/or spiritual lives look different today for many; is it possible that there's something to be learned from this? I believe there is. It can take some effort to get past an initial urge to dismiss belief systems that seem incoherent and spiritual practices that take place outside of church walls. The recognition of validity in the reality of new praxes and acknowledging the immense diversity and complexity

inherent and necessary in its many forms is risky and as such, I believe, offers great

potential for human development and wellbeing.[1]

The terms "spirituality" and "spiritual" appear widely in popular discourse to

describe practices (yoga, hiking, dietary choices), ways of being in the world (self-aware,

other-oriented, mindfulness) and products (books, audio series, life coaching, and on-line

classes), both within and outside of religious contexts. Increasing numbers of people have

adopted the personal identifier "spiritual but not religious," (SBNR) which commonly

implies that one has kept all the deep, personal and beautiful elements of religion, but left

behind the dogma and fundamentalist rules of the institution (Bregman, 2014). The very

ubiquity of the term "spirituality" points to a generalized yearning, which is obviously

important to many despite the perceived threat this phenomenon poses to some traditional

religious practitioners. As a practical theologian, I advocate for the power of traditional

understandings and connections to religious practice while acknowledging that

contemporary formulations and expressions of "spirituality" may hold new possibilities

for human happiness and depth of meaning.

Religion and spirituality are evolving into distinct stand-alone categories for

some, while others argue that both continue to be powerful for many people, deeply

interwoven with hopes, fears, joys, and the ways they interact with the world. In the

early 21st century, social scientists and others began to articulate distinctions between

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[1] Larry Graham names the openness to possibilities in changing circumstances "serendipitous in-betweenness," suggesting it offers opportunities for co-creation, collaboration, and transformation (L. Graham, 2014).

religion and spirituality, which contributed to the polarization of the concepts. Kenneth

Pargament describes the conclusions implied in their work as:

> …religion as institutional versus spirituality as individual, religion as external and objective versus spirituality as internal and subjective, religion as old versus spirituality as new, religion as structural versus spirituality as functional, religion as fixed and frozen versus spirituality as flexible and dynamic, and even religion as bad versus spirituality as good. (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones Jr., & Shafranske, 2013, p. 11)

This binary understanding of the nature of spirituality and religion forms the foundation

for the SBNR ethos and structures much of the contemporary cultural discourse about

these topics.

Because my theological questions in this dissertation are driven by a contextual

sea change in adherence to institutional religion, contextual realities are my starting point

as a practical theologian. The field of practical theology acknowledges the importance

and necessity of beginning with human experience. This is a different starting place than

many systematic Christian theologies, which begin with traditional categories such as

doctrine of God or soteriology rather than allowing the significant theological categories

to arise from human experience. Even when these theologies do acknowledge the

significance of human experience, the theological work often goes only one way—from

theory to practice. The focus is on learning and knowing "the truth" so that those

responsible for ministry are better able to apply that truth (the truth of scripture and

tradition), to guide people to salvation. The equation is altered by adding a third

theological source: human experience or context, which reveals a reality constructed by

the experiences we, individually and as cultures, have and our attempts to make meaning

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from them (Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–4). This does not deny the importance of the past or of tradition (also human constructs and perceptions), however, the present moment or context is fully as important and potentially revelatory as the past. How are we to access a sense of the theological source of human experience in order to determine its spiritual significance? An important lens into the present moment of emerging spiritualities is contemporary media culture, to which we now turn.

Spirituality in a Media Culture

Making one's way through life without religious affiliation is becoming more common in the United States. However, many of the unaffiliated are constructing their own individual meaning making and coping systems by appropriating images, objects, practices and beliefs from a variety of religious resources and using them in new ways, disconnected from the originating traditions. Sometimes referred to as "sampling" or "remixing," this is a practice that comes naturally to many in contemporary digital culture. Religions have always been constructed, but the process of building religious and spiritual identity is happening in qualitatively different ways, especially on an individual level (Mahan, 2014). Digital culture contributes to this, with media being employed to form communities and in the construction and sharing of religious identities. Evolving forms of media culture play important roles in shaping what being "religious" or "spiritual" looks like and enable new possibilities for performing spirituality and religion. These new forms of spiritual expression may appear unfamiliar and even strange to some, but they do show some continuity with their more traditional counterparts in historical Christian spiritualities. Mediated spirituality is often assumed to be shallow and

inadequate, however the range of offerings actually consists of a spectrum from superficial to substantial. People are purchasing spiritual teachings, courses, books and products online, and there are a wide variety of purveyors eager to offer meaningful and marketable items for consumers.

Consumption, whether it is through the purchase of books, products or participating in an online course, can be seen as active or passive. A critique of consumption in the context of spirituality claims that "it substitutes possession for experience and in doing so it promises things it cannot deliver" (Mahan, 2014, location 1038). This appears to be a passive, acquisitive approach to the practice of spirituality, although it evidently has its own kind of meaning making results. It may be incorrect, however, to name this as passive; in engagement with media culture, new and often individual meanings are co-created as the product and the consumer interact (Mahan, 2014, location 1083). A term for this is "prosumption," originally used by Alvin Toffler, combining consumption and production to indicate the results of this process of engagement. This concept provides us with a means to look beyond shallow interpretations of contemporary spiritual practice and instead anticipate nuance, depth and creative construction within consumer and mediated cultural expressions of spirituality.

Post-Secular Spirituality

Spirituality (with its many definitions) is emerging in unexpected ways and places, defying widespread predictions of secularization by sociologists of religion and others in decades past. Elaine Graham suggests that "we are witnessing an unprecedented

co-existence of resurgence, decline, and mutation, [of religion] which some are terming the "post-secular" condition" (Graham, 2014, p. 235). Proponents of post-secular religious theory believe these emerging spiritual expressions are a valuable source not only for personal fulfillment, but for constructive public discourse; with growing awareness of a larger significance, complexity and potential for positive social change (Cady, 2014, Graham, 2013, Mercadante, 2014).

New realities call for terminology to adequately reflect them. Post-secular spirituality refers to a way of conceptualizing a new critical consciousness about the spiritual and the religious, and a new engagement in a time of widespread disaffiliation from religious institutions and organizations, which I have found to be helpful. Secularism is an ideology of the Enlightenment, which promoted the extraction of religion from public domains and relegated it to the private. Referring to our time of change and shifting spiritual expressions as a "late-secular—and embryonically post-secular—age" (Cady, 2014, p. 312), Linell Cady suggests that some are using this concept to illustrate the collapse of a religious/secular schema which can be a constraining and inadequate way of describing contemporary reality (Cady, 2014, p. 298). The binary model is incapable of accommodating the varied and nuanced expressions of spirituality we are witnessing today, and adept terminology is needed to preclude the cursory dismissal of new praxes and understandings.

Not everyone agrees with the assessment that we have moved beyond "secular." Khaled Furani offers a brief history of the development of secularity, suggesting it needs further exploration for its untapped potential before we adopt the language of "post-

secular" (Furani, 2015). He acknowledges the omnipresence of secularity relative to religion specifically, and recognizes the impetus to move beyond its perceived dismissal and privatization of religion, while also encouraging a deeper look at its possibilities. He insists that secularization is not necessarily desacralization, and offers six "floating rings of the secular," in an effort to historically illustrate his point that contemporary calls for the designation of a post-secular age may be misguided and even unnecessary. Briefly, the roots of the word "secular" lie in the Latin *saeculum*, which implied finitude (Furani, 2015, p. 10), designating a period of time. Secondly, the movement of Christianity into Europe evolved the term to "secular," signifying temporality. The third ring of secularity arose from the monastic tradition, where priests were designated as secular or monastic based on where they lived out their vocations. The fourth ring is where the meaning begins to change to an understanding of the separation of the ecclesiastical and the secular, initiated by the state's seizure of church property and authority after the Protestant Revolution. The 19th century saw the emergence of the fifth ring of understanding, a separating of "the religious" and "the political," seen at that time to be beneficial for both entities. It is not until the emergence of the sixth ring, "a sociological thesis of secularization" in the 20th century (Furani, 2015, p. 12), that the contemporary understanding of secularization as an evolutionary diminishment of religion took hold.

While I am intrigued by Furani's call to delve deeper into the potentialities of the secular, there needs to be a new term to reflect new realities. In whatever way the phenomenon is named or categorized, and despite the potential limitations of terminology, this is a necessary and pressing cultural discourse, and influential thinkers

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are using the term post-secular. It acknowledges that something new is going on while providing a scholarly legitimacy distinguishing this newness from traditional conceptions and practices of religiosity. The vast amount of "spiritual" offerings and the sheer numbers of people who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious suggest that a dying away of the religious or the spiritual has not occurred, and that in fact the longing and search for the spiritual is stronger than ever, although breaking with traditional expressions.

There remains, however, a cultural and societal tendency in the West to polarize concepts of the religious and the secular; a trajectory that has led to essentialization and a poverty of meaning for both. One reason to critique the polarization of the religious and the secular lies in the superficial understandings of both religion and secularity that often undergird this division. Also, less than nuanced understandings of religion often result in a lack of recognition for newer forms of religious and spiritual practice, which may be very important to people. Another problem is a growing awareness that the binary and oppositional pairing of "religious" and "secular" is not only inadequate, but also potentially destructive (Cady, 2014, p. 299). The general understanding is that in this extraction process, humanity moves toward fuller and richer living. Actually, however, this disentangling often leads to inadequate understandings of both the secular and the religious, as the definitions become increasingly narrow and superficial. This can impede the full development and potential of each, and does not provide space for acknowledging what happens outside and between these constructs, or the myriad of ways religiosity, spirituality and human flourishing happens here.

Another concern raised by the polarization of the religious and the secular is that such a division contradicts the way that religious traditions actually develop; embedded in and engaged with the cultures that gave them birth (Roy, 2014). The notion of "religious purity" and the desire to remove "impure" cultural elements can lead to strictly defined religious identities, and truths as sound bytes that contribute to religious fundamentalisms. A loss of complexity is inherent in this process, as culture and religion cease to engage with each other in ways that lead to definition and ongoing evolution.

Secularity was supposed to be the state we would arrive at once the old uncertainties and superstitions were explained and understood by science and rational thought. The process of secularism meant to relegate religion to the private sphere, creating space in the public domain for reason and power based on objective knowledge. Modern scientific thought has had its own polarizing effects on religious discourse; through the conflation of understandings about science and religion, both are commonly seen as "a vehicle for *information* rather than *transformation*" (Latour, 2013, p. 30). Religion is increasingly viewed merely as a belief system, and if one believes, then one is religious. However, the fertile field of personal and communal transformation, which is the historical realm of religion, gets lost in this essentialist understanding, and is often co-opted or taken up by the "spirituality" movement, which we will see can sometimes be problematic.

It is not only secular forces that contribute to this dilemma. Previously held beliefs no longer make sense or have meaning for many in the contemporary context, because they've been too neatly defined and kept in their delineated boxes of religious

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traditions, in an effort to differentiate the religious from the secular. In many cases, the powerful potential these words and ideas once held have been shackled, and this disappointing truth may be part of why so many people walk away from religious traditions (Latour, 2013, p. 59). The reality is, the people, places and objects of religious practice have never been neatly defined or contained, and the religious/secular project including its contemporary commentary has written out much of that richness and depth.

The concept of reflexivity is helpful as we consider the effects of the widening gulf between religiosity and secularity. In the context of religiosity, reflexivity refers to an awareness of the many options one has for religious commitment, and the fact that one's religious identity is chosen and constructed much more today than in the past (Hogue, 2010, p. 356). Although this can be interpreted as ambiguous, and perhaps seen as a loss from the religious certainties of old, it may also signal a deepening and more meaningful ownership of religious, theological or spiritual understandings. Dogma and teaching that were formerly held as unquestioned belief may, through the process of a wider exposure, the reconciliation of personal experience and theological reflection, along with a sense of permission or freedom gained from the secularization process itself, lead to meaningful and life-altering understandings, unavailable to many in previous formulations of religious identities and knowing.

An increasingly globalized population also contributes to shifting religious identities and permeable religious borders. Practical theology is called to be attentive to religious pluralism and alterity in its many forms, and to utilize methodologies that will lead to "justice, repair, and peace"(Greider, 2014, p. 460). Globally, we have observed

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that those who feel strongly about keeping traditional religious boundaries intact

sometimes withdraw and can become radicalized as they strive to define and differentiate

themselves. Also unsettling are those claiming to be spiritual but not religious who view

their spiritual practices simply as tools for personal transformation and lose sight of the

communal nature and responsibilities of our shared existence. A commitment to justice,

repair and peace sets the stage for openness to the emergence and construction of new

possibilities.

Methodology

Emerging expressions of post-secular spiritualities compel practical theological

engagement and analysis because of their ubiquity and significance to many people who

self-identify as spiritual but not religious. Preliminary research indicates that two major

points of contention between emerging spiritualities and traditional Christian spiritualities

are centered on the locus of authority and the role of community; areas this dissertation

will explore.[2] These concepts are foundational to the SBNR ethos, and are major

contributors to the breakdown of the conversation between traditional and post-secular

spiritualities. Many people no longer find religious authority figures to be necessary or

even credible. One result is a turn to an inner authority, a divine presence within, when

one is seeking guidance. Understandings of community are also vastly changed, with

long-term affiliation giving way to shorter-term and more fluid commitments, when they

happen at all. The legitimacy of models of authority and community embodied in many

emerging post secular spiritualities are challenged by some who are traditionally

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[2] For an exploration of the relationship between community and authority, see (Seligman, 2003), especially Chapter Two.

religious; however, these new expressions of spirituality share with more conventional

approaches an impetus toward human wholeness and well-being, suggesting more

commonality between them than may be assumed.

This project will undertake a thematic analysis of post secular spiritualities in the

areas of community and authority, as articulated in three recent studies on the beliefs and

practices of the spiritual but not religious:[3] (*Ammerman, Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes;*

Finding Religion in Everyday Life, 2013; Mercadante, Belief Without Borders; Inside the

Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious, 2014; and *Schofield-Clark, From Angels to*

Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural, 2003). More detail on these studies is

offered in Chapter 5; however, a brief introduction will be helpful here. Using an

empirical, lived religion approach, sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman maps

contemporary understandings of spirituality through personal narrative, describing how

people perceive the sacred in places including work, public life, families and

communities and events such as adversity, illness and death. Theologian Linda

Mercadante is interested in the theology and belief systems of the SBNRs. Through in-

depth interviews, she comes to learn respondents' views about how we are to treat others,

what sin means and how they understand God and the afterlife. She takes seriously how

these people weave American and spiritual values into a theology of meaning. Professor

of media studies Lynn Schofield Clark offers an ethnographic study of teenagers (11-21)

that explores their spiritual lives, often incorporating experiences of the supernatural as

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[3] The related term "Nones" is a larger category that includes Atheists, Agnostics, Secular Humanists and even religious people who claim no affiliation, although they are sometimes used interchangeably. See (Drescher, 2016).

presented in popular culture. Clark's work is especially helpful for this project because her widely ranging socioeconomic interviewees provide a different perspective from the largely adult, middle-class respondents in other two studies. These studies qualitatively probe the construction of spiritual identities by asking questions about understandings of spirituality, religion, and spiritual practices. A description of this lived reality will provide a foundation for analyzing two representative understandings of authority and community: a traditional Christian approach and a post-secular spirituality approach.

How and where does one engage two such disparate entities? And, how can only one voice from the vast possibilities of traditional Christian and post-secular spiritualities possibly convey the depth necessary for insight into these very different worldviews? With these challenges in mind, I determined that I needed to choose two credible representatives who would have something specific to say about religious authority and community, with an honest acknowledgement of their inherent limitations. I realize that neither representative can speak for everyone; however, this approach will provide one view into the contemporary reality.

Jesuit priest, professor and author Karl Rahner emerged as an exemplar, as I recalled his foundational belief in God's desire for self-communication with humanity and his commitment to engage his ideas with the current lived reality of human beings. Influenced by his own Jesuit spirituality and important figures including Thomas Aquinas, Martin Heidegger, Georg Hegel and Immanuel Kant, his work includes 4,000 publications, most of which were responses to major religious issues raised in the Catholic Church during his adult life. In his role as peritus, an expert theological advisor

at the Second Vatican Council, he struggled with fundamental issues including the salvation of non-Christians, the identity and meaning of the Church and how Christians were to be in relation with those of other faith traditions; issues that remain relevant in contemporary culture. In his seminal work, *The Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner placed key ideas from the Christian tradition into conversation with the situations and needs of the modern world. He wanted people in their actual, lived experience to know the truth of God and reflect on the integration of doctrine, moral thought and spirituality in a way that honored the intellect (Rahner, 1982).

In addition to his academic work are pastoral publications on prayer and spirituality, interviews and autobiographical reflections. In his later writing, Rahner was increasingly aware of the changing nature of the importance of faith and the Church in peoples' lives, especially Christians, which he viewed as an unfortunate development. He was concerned with inter-religious dialogue, the importance of spirituality and criticism of the institutional church when he perceived its focus to be off-track. Because of his interest in the relationship of spirituality and lived religious experience, he serves as a helpful partner in this conversation. At the same time, his participation in an historic religious order and in conversations with the institutional Catholic church mark him as a clear representative of more traditional affiliative religious practice.

Choosing the representative voice of contemporary spiritual expressions proved a bit more challenging, and involved exploring and rejecting a surprising number of options. Due to the longevity, credibility and the sheer volume of published materials by a wide variety of teachers and practitioners, I chose *Sounds True*, a multi-media

publishing company with a mission of "disseminating spiritual wisdom" (Simon, 2015a).

In addition to interviewing the company's founder, Tami Simon, I also include and

reflect on some of the teachers and products the company publishes. *Sounds True*

employs more than 80 people and has a library of over 1500 titles; the company's

publishing formats include spoken word audio, audio learning courses, books, interactive

learning kits, music, and instructional DVDs. Their vision statement is a rallying cry for a

life of spiritual meaning: "*Sounds True* exists to inspire, support, and serve personal

transformation and spiritual awakening" (Simon, 2015a). Included in their offerings is a

diverse range of recorded materials representing major spiritual traditions, as well as

humanities and the arts. In their effort to "preserve the essential 'living wisdom' of the

author, artist, or spiritual teacher," they strive to capture the traditional elements of a

teacher-student relationship in the ways the teachings are presented. My goal was to learn

from Ms. Simon her own philosophy of and motivation for her work as well as to gain

insight into her customers and what is most compelling for them as spiritual seekers. I

conclude with a discussion and analysis of how these differing understandings of spiritual

community and authority are potentially constructive for contemporary spiritual seekers

and religious traditions, and consider the implications for field of practical theology.

Purpose and Goals

Through this dialogue I hope to open space for often-oppositional traditional and

post-secular spiritualities to inform and mutually enrich one another. Elaine Graham

cautions that post-secular spirituality is not a return to pre-modern understandings nor a

triumph of religion, but rather a new and emerging "kind of 'third space' between secular

reason and religious revival" (Graham, 2013). She uses this term to point to something new that demands attention, and it is this space I will explore, using the metaphor of a migratory path. I propose this as the path where post-secular spiritualities and traditional religious and spiritual expressions can engage with and learn from each other, challenging the tendency to be in opposition to one another. I will suggest this path can be used to navigate and hold some of the tensions, move past superficial assumptions, and toward a re-engagement of religion and spirituality, not for the purpose of one "winning out" over the other, but for their potential mutual enrichment. This continuum of deep dialogue and co-creation allows for the emergence of new possibilities and an entry point for practical theological engagement and accompaniment. This postmodern and intercultural approach acknowledges the "contextual and provisional nature of knowledge" (Doehring, 2015, p. xxv), and echoes the intention of this project to "…proceed cautiously and with reverence, not assuming we know what is commonplace or sacred, ready to be surprised by the other and ourselves" (Doehring, 2015, p. 2). This project assumes an open stance to new potentialities in this cultural phenomenon and an acknowledgement of what emerging spiritualities can and do contribute to human well-being. It is my hope that this commitment will preclude a rush to judgment or a dismissive attitude towards contemporary spiritual expressions; an approach that can rightly be understood as patronizing.

Openness to and respect for emerging spiritualities does not mean there are not critical questions to pose as a field concerned with human well-being, deriving from the conviction of God's intent for creation to flourish. Pastoral theology's (and practical

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theology's within this) "…overriding concern for well-being is grounded in a theological vision of a loving God who wills that all participate in the divine life" (McClure, 2008, p. 189). A critical engagement with emerging post-secular spiritual expressions has transformational potential for those studying them and for those who experience shifts in thinking and behavior based on new insights and understandings of novel situations, surely a desired outcome of participation in the divine life.

The goal of this project is a quest into contemporary spiritual understandings and practices to determine their efficacy and potential for personal change leading to transformative ways of being in the world; a process of ongoing importance to traditional Christian spiritualities. I study these expressions of lived religion as a Catholic lay minister and theologian who is deeply interested in how relational energy (God, for me) works to inspire people to new forms of religious and spiritual expression, and the ways practical theology can enrich and facilitate the cultural conversation around this.

Engaging a co-creative meeting space may provide opportunities to bridge the divide between religious and secular polarization, raising awareness of the immanent sacred (however people may define that), and offer a compelling vision of the integrity and potentiality of historical religious wisdom for contemporary life. For the field of practical theology, new conversation partners may be envisioned and legitimated, leading to more expansive understandings of spiritual authority and community. For more traditional religious practitioners who may have written off those outside their doors, this effort might counter oppositional energy to emerging ways of living religion and encourage openness to the possibilities of learning from post-secular spiritualities. For

contemporary spiritual seekers, this approach may make available historic spiritual

resources from the Christian tradition that would be beneficial and practical, promoting

integration and depth for more fulfilling and generative spiritual living. Finally, this

project may also discover that those engaged in emerging post secular spiritualities find

little value in traditional articulations of authority and community, and are instead

creating something unique and potentially revelatory.

Spirituality: Toward a Definition

Perhaps the most important and daunting task before we begin is to move toward

a definition of "spirituality" in which to root ourselves; one that will be meaningful and

accessible both for more traditional Christians and for those who identify as spiritual but

not religious. Ammerman, in her research with the SBNR says the following definition is

representative of many of her respondents: "Real spirituality is about living a virtuous

life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one's own selfish interests to seek

what is right" (Ammerman, 2013b, p. 272). Ammerman names this "ethical spirituality,"

and its practices (including love, charity, kindness and good deeds) are adopted by people

across the spectrum from non-believer to believer. This is certainly an element of

spirituality, however, there is surely more to be understood.

After exploring spirituality from a variety of contexts and disciplines, the editors

of *Present-Day Spiritualities* concluded that a comprehensive definition of spirituality

was not achieved through the efforts of their contributors; however, they offer a list of

typical "aspects." These elements capture the essence of spirituality as understood,

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experienced and described by many of the survey respondents and spiritual thinkers we

will encounter, and so provide a helpful grounding for this project:

- focusing on the spirit or core of a person
- having extraordinary experiences
- dealing with liminal questions and basic values
- striving for fullness of life
- experiencing the transcendent or ultimate reality (Hense, Jespers, & Nissen, 2013, p. 222)

The desire for fullness of life, assenting to basic values, and experiences of transcendence

seem to provide a common starting point for people across the spectrum. Another point

of connection is the understanding that spirituality is not always centered on a deity.

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, a Jesuit priest and archeologist wrote, "A spirituality is a

person's way of being, thinking, choosing and acting in the world in light of that person's

ultimate values" (Savary, 2007, p. 4). A more secular spirituality has also been identified

in business, healthcare and civic settings, encompassing the search for human meaning

and a common desire for the greater good (Sheldrake, 2013, pp. 210–211). Recreation

and leisure activities including sports, fishing and spending time in nature are also

identified as expressions of spirituality for many people (Bregman, 2014, pp. 135–150).

These understandings provide us with room to maneuver as we trace the evolution of the

spiritual from religion, compare understandings of religious community and authority,

and explore the practices, beliefs, and longings of those who identify as spiritual but not

religious.

Chapter Review

Chapter 2 will compare understandings and practices of spirituality in both traditional Christian contexts and in contemporary post-secular spiritual expressions. Chapter 3 introduces theologian Karl Rahner, our voice of a traditional Christian spirituality, providing insight into his beliefs and his pastoral concerns in relation to authority and community. Chapter 4 explores the ways spirituality is mediated today and the implications for individuals, communities and religious traditions. This chapter will also introduce *Sounds True*, our voice of contemporary post-secular spirituality, tracing the history of the company and the motivation of the founder, Tami Simon, through personal interview. In Chapter 5, I compare and contrast understandings of spiritual authority and community through a thematic analysis of study respondents in conversation with Karl Rahner and Tami Simon.

Chapter 6 traces the story of Clare, a composite character representing study respondents, as she handles three life challenges on her migratory path from the Catholicism of her childhood to new ways of understanding herself and her spirituality. Chapter 7 will conclude by "tracing the sacred" in contemporary post-secular spiritual practice, and consider the implications of this reality for the field of practical theology. How can the field itself be informed and perhaps enriched by new understandings of religious authority and community? What can the field offer in a critical engagement with spiritual currents running outside of traditional religious boundaries? Where do we go from here?

Chapter Two: Spirituality Then and Now

Spirituality means different things to different people. It is a concept and a term that is used loosely in the contemporary Western world, both with and without religious connotations. It is often employed in the context of what makes one feel good, whole, connected and is even associated with being a deep thinker. It does not necessarily imply a commitment to an organization or even a practice. In fact, it is often used as a liberative label, suggesting that one has moved on from the immature and magical understandings of religion to a deeper, fuller immersion in what is most important in life. Identifying as spiritual but not religious is more common today, as people are increasingly leaving behind religious affiliation, but still want to be identified as "moral and good people" (Clark, 2003, location 5306). In its most self-directed forms, spirituality can be seen as a way to strengthen one's own individuality, developing new awarenesses and focused solely on personal growth.[4] However, in some iterations, this personal growth is viewed as a necessary step on the way to having something of value to offer to the world, and not simply an end in itself.

Because spirituality is such a powerful concept and because the very ubiquity of the term points to a lack of deep understanding or consensus, this chapter will offer a thematic exploration of some of the foundations of traditional Christian spiritualities and

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[4] For a non-institutional, non-dogmatic approach to spirituality, see R. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life.* (Solomon, 2006).

contemporary post-secular spiritualities. Comparing and contrasting these will provide more in-depth understandings of how a spiritual life is to be lived from two very different perspectives. This will require adaptive methodologies as well as faith and persistence in the creative and sometimes confusing search for human meaning, connection and transcendence. Religious and spiritual practices are emerging in unexpected places, requiring those concerned with the development and nurture of the spiritual life to listen and respond in new ways. Religious affiliation continues to decline, but the often commodified "spirituality" is on the rise, suggesting "a clear call from the hearts of 'secular' seekers for guidance for some vision and a way of life beyond secularity" (Tracy, 2014, p. 83). Clearly, our contemporary realities are calling for something new from both religion *and* spirituality.

Leaving Religion

Research confirms that the majority of those who claim to be nonreligious today actually grew up involved with a religious tradition, but then left as teenagers or adults (Zuckerman, 2011). The reasons people leave religion may not be surprising: questions of theodicy (God and evil), unanswered prayer, issues of gender and sexuality, or a realization that key tenets of their belief are no longer congruent with lived experience are common. Although they have left their traditions, many people still carry some of what they learned and lived for many years of their lives, and these residual understandings may manifest in new places and even be used and relied on in times of difficulty. Zuckerman questioned his subjects about what they missed about being religious, how they made moral decisions outside of a religious framework, and if their

ideas about meaning in life had changed. The responses were similar to those of Ammerman's "Golden Rule Christians", in that they focused on how they lived their lives and how they treated others, operating out of empathy instead of a fear of damnation. The leaving of Christian religious traditions is a freeing and positive move for many; however, the understandings of the history of Christian spirituality and grounding in traditional spiritual practices necessarily become tenuous and unmoored.

Why are religious institutions losing their members and their authority? Some suggest that they no longer have the capacity to offer adequate or plausible tools for dealing with inexplicable events including the Holocaust and terrorism for example, or to deal with major shifts in long-accepted norms and expectations for women, families or sexuality (Wuthnow, 1998). These realities have likely played a role in encouraging people to find their own way and seek out their own path toward meaning and/or the sacred, and contributed to polarized understandings of spirituality and religion.

Academic fields including sociology and psychology of religion also contribute to changing understandings of religiosity and spirituality. Social scientists, among others in the early 21st century, made distinctions between religion and spirituality, furthering the polarization of the concepts. In 1964, American psychologist Albert Maslow asserted that morality, spirituality and ethics were not simply the domain of religious institutions (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999, p. 899). He believed that naming experiences of transcendence outside of religious contexts liberated these experiences from controlling religious structures. It is clear that this separation has been developing over the last

decades in various fields and contexts, so the current realities should perhaps not be surprising.

More traditionally religious scholars continue to argue that only the church can be the arbiter and facilitator of spirituality. Stanley Hauerwas views the church as "A colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another...resident aliens" (Hauerwas, 2014, location 226). This reflects a belief that the Christian life and spirituality are not simply interior and personal, but rather are to be collective ventures, active in the world. The self-authority of the individual described by Ammerman, Mercadante and other contemporary lived religion researchers are the polar opposite of what Hauerwaus and others like him envision. Without the church, one experiences "…not self-freedom, but self-centeredness, loneliness, superficiality and harried consumerism" (Hauerwas, 2014, location 726). Hauerwaus and others advocate for institutional memory and a coherent narrative for authentic spiritual and religious living; calling on the Christian Church to reassert itself into society and convince people of the necessity of organized religion for the spiritual life. With the overall societal inclination to rebuff institutional authority of any type, this does not seem like a viable option. I don't discount his claims about contemporary lives of "superficiality and harried consumerism," however, I'm not sure that has resulted from freedom from institutional religious ties. There will always be people who want to belong and who are looking for guidance and direction from someone they view as an authority, however, in terms of religious affiliation, research shows that the percentage of those who identify as atheist, agnostic or "none" in the

United States has grown from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.8% in 2015 (Lipka, 2015), a figure

that is projected to continue its upward trajectory.

Historic Understandings of Spirituality

The sense of spirit, divine presence, has deep roots. For the ancient Greeks, the term

"eudaimonia" referred to good spirits, being well-blessed with good divinity in one's

heart. The ancients believed everything had a spirit and that the spirits could interact with

us. These spirits took up presence in the heart; the site where we interact with them.

"Spirituality" comes from the Latin noun *spiritualitas*, which derives from the Greek

pneuma (spirit). Contrary to contemporary understandings, this is not a setting up of body

against soul, but actually contrasts ways of approaching and comprehending life from a

physical and spiritual perspective. Someone who was "spiritual" (see 1 Cor. 2, 13-15)

was someone within whom the Spirit of God dwelt. This understanding of spirituality

was co-opted in the West in the 12th century, although it did not disappear. The Scholastic

movement introduced a new way to use the concept, which sought to identify thinking

human beings as spiritual as opposed to the rest of creation. This understanding of

spirituality soon became associated only with thinking human beings who were clerics,

and the concept of the spirituality of the laity eventually virtually disappeared in the

West, only making a comeback after Vatican II in the 1960s. A new understanding of the

concept articulated some basic tenets, including its communal nature vs. purely

individual, its integration with mainstream theology, its inclusion in everyday life as

opposed to only religious or monastic life and also allowed for the beginnings of

ecumenical discourse (Sheldrake, 2013, p. 2).

Questions of spirituality also relate to human flourishing or happiness. This is more of a contemporary cultural focus; however, the concept of spirituality, including Christian spirituality, is deeply interwoven in this project, and often viewed as integral to living to one's full, human, God-given potential. Obviously, our generation is not the first to grapple with meaning, divine presence or our responsibilities as human beings, let alone eternal salvation. Learning about the lives and spiritual practices of our forebears provides context and perspective, and reminds us of hard-earned wisdom and truth that remain relevant for many today. It also helps us avoid pitfalls and wrong turns; we see both the development of spiritual maturity as well as potentially misdirected efforts, which may provide guidance for contemporary seekers.

The trials and struggles of the early monastics reveal the difficulties inherent in a genuine search for connection with the Divine, and a way to live a spiritual life. How *does* God want us to live? Are we to withdraw from the world, even reject it in favor of a life focused on God? Are we to take the Greek path of kenosis; emptying ourselves of selfishness, acquisitiveness, and personal concerns in order to make space for God? Are we to dedicate ourselves to good works and advocating for a better world? Or, is it some combination of contemplation and action? And, what is the ultimate goal? These questions have been asked and approached in a variety of ways throughout the history of Christian spirituality and continue to prove engaging for many today. Some early monastics and a 12th century saint will help illuminate some traditional and foundational Christian approaches.

Pre-Modern Spirituality

Some of the earliest "spiritual" people in the Christian tradition were the monastic ascetics, the desert fathers and mothers, who were affiliated with a particular religious tradition and dedicated their lives to full-time spiritual practice. The Eastern monks were among the early anchorites; those who withdrew from the world. Filled with desire for union with God, and convinced that it was impossible for this to happen in their noisy, sin-filled cities, they went to the deserts. As martyrdom decreased and Christianity became mainstream, the life of a hermit was seen as a way of reaching spiritual perfection. The movement started as a protest against what was seen by many as watered-down practice of the faith after the conversion of Constantine as well as what they saw as the Church's trajectory toward power and away from the word of God. For many hermits, the advantages included the time and space available to go to war with one's inner demons, and thereby ascend closer to God and salvation.

St. Anthony (251-356) serves as an exemplar of this early Christian monastic spirituality. Although he left no writings, his understanding is revealed in how he lived his life as described by his biographer. In "The Life of St. Anthony," written by St. Athanasius, he describes Anthony's spiritual practices: "prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, kindness to the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from wrath, hospitality" (Athanasius, 2010, location 236). For Anthony, "…the fiber of the soul is then sound when the pleasures of the body are diminished" (Athanasius, 2010, location 116) Anthony lived a life of asceticism, prayer and fasting. It was said that he wore a hair garment, didn't bathe, ate salt and bread just once a day, and slept on the ground.

According to Athanasius, "…he used to eat and sleep and go about all other bodily necessities with shame when he thought of the spiritual faculties of the soul" (Athanasius, 2010, location 559). The functions of the body were viewed as something to be endured, even shameful in contrast with spiritual pursuits. Athanasius described him as having a "…soul free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection…" (Athanasius, 2010, location 198). This reflected the dualistic mindset common in the area and the times, definitely setting up body against soul, with the choice of asceticism acknowledged as the higher calling.[5]

There are stories of Anthony being afflicted by demonic temptations, including attacks by wild beasts, phantoms of women (categorized as "foul pleasure"), and even being physically beaten by the devil; all metaphors for his spiritual struggle and growth. Despite the alarming stories of Anthony's anchoritic existence, he attracted many people who sought his spiritual teaching, drawn by his humility, piety and love. Seekers came looking for a spiritual master, a wisdom figure who would answer their deepest questions, or at least help them articulate their questions. This required not only a willingness to seek but to reflect afterward, a time-consuming, thoughtful and intentional process (Rousseau, 1986, pp. 120–121) What were the motivations of those who chose this ascetical life? At least part of it, for Anthony, was concern for his own salvation. "So let us abide daily, firm in our discipline, knowing that if we are careless for a single day the Lord will not pardon us…but will be wrath against us for our neglect" (Athanasius,

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[5] For example, in the Eastern Syriac tradition a fourth-century book suggests that "The 'just' are those who lead normal human lives (including marriage) and receive only a pledge of the fullness of the Spirit. However the 'perfect' do not marry and lead lives of total renunciation. These receive the fullness of the Spirit" (Sheldrake, 2013, p. 74).

2010, location 242). There was certainly more to his motivation than fear; however, this understanding of God as the Divine punisher has played an important role in Christian spirituality throughout the ages.[6] Not surprisingly, this image of God is rejected by most of the SBNR study respondents who claim belief in a deity; the institutional church has assumed the role of punisher and enforcer instead.

Anthony absorbed sacred scripture, the word of God, and lived by it, including the admonitions in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 regarding the importance of work, giving to the needy, and constant prayer. When he did meet with others it was toward understanding their spiritual disciplines and virtues, (and encouraging them in those) so that he could increase and further develop his own practices. It was said that Anthony received a vision of an angel, who sat braiding palm leaves, then got up for prayer, then sat down again to weave. A voice told him, "Anthony, do this and you will rest." According to Athanasius, Anthony was never bored again, most likely referring to acedia, a condition defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "spiritual or mental sloth; apathy" ("Oxford Dictionaries," 2016). As hundreds of people came to Anthony as disciples, he encouraged them in manual labor, a precursor to St. Benedict's Rule of prayer and work and a response to the angel's message.

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[6] This teleology is grounded in a dualistic theological anthropology deriving from Platonism, which distinguished between the physical and the spiritual world, denigrating the first and deifying the second. "…in order for the soul to 'get to God' one had to 'get rid of' the body through severe fasting, corporal flagellation, and extreme isolation" (Perrin, 2011, p. 445). St. Augustine (354-430) was also an influence; it was his belief that concupiscence is what constitutes human existence after the fall of Adam and Eve, and that this drive to satisfy the self is most often revealed in sexuality (Ross, 2012, p. 21). It wasn't that the body itself was bad; God had created it! However, it was in need of discipline and that discipline was a function of religion and spiritual practices. It was only by the grace of God that we were able to choose the good, so prayer and other spiritual practices, just like the manual labor of the monks, worked to purify the heart to receive God's grace.

While Anthony was in the desert, other understandings of and approaches to God were taking place. Christian spirituality had begun a turn toward doctrinal correctness in the early fourth century in the West, including the slow development of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo and the Council of Nicaea in 325 debating Jesus' divinity. The debate was not just between learned theologians; popular songs were written and arguments were engaged in at the marketplaces, as the spiritual and religious experiences and understandings of people were important parts of life and personal identity for many (Armstrong, 2010, p. 107).

Eastern and Western Christian understandings continued to move in different directions, however, whether one believed God was fully transcendent and unknowable, or that all people could be deified as Jesus was, there was a continued emphasis on discipline, practice and spiritual exercises, including the reading of scripture. Origen (185-254) was an early biblical interpreter and a student of *allegoria* with both Jewish and Greek teachers. He encouraged the reading of sacred Scripture as a spiritual exercise, by going beyond the words to the embedded truths and deeper messages that God wanted one to see. Long and intense contemplation was required, but the reward was connection with the Divine. Scripture was not read in a literal way at this point, and it would not have made sense to people of this time to do so. Origen promoted the virtues of discipline, purity, prayer and sobriety in order to prepare one's self for deeper exegesis. The mystery of Scripture lay in its hidden reality, accessible only through a disciplined spiritual process of stages, and the discipline of mind and heart was critical for spiritual

illumination and understanding.[7] Early Christian spirituality and spiritual practice were

traditioned to the sacred texts of the Bible, and it was inconceivable to think about being

spiritual or holy without the commitment of time and effort to delve deeply into these

texts.

Monastic Spirituality

A life of discipline has been consistently held in high regard in traditional Christian

spiritualities. In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote his Rule, or way of living as God

intended. His Rule is an example of cenobitic monasticism, a community approach, in

which he claimed that everything needed to fulfill the obligation to love God and obey

God's commands are located within the monastery, and the common life the monks

share. Although the Abbot is in charge, he or she (an Abbess in the case of a community

of women) is also subject to the Rule, and this provided an egalitarian structure,

organization and clear expectations for the members. The Rule allows for a simple but

sufficient life, which avoided many of the radically ascetical practices of anchorites such

as Anthony. Accountability takes precedence over destitution in this context; community

members are expected to hold each other accountable and make decisions that benefit the

community over the individual. Members act together; meals, prayer, work, welcoming

guests, rising and going to bed at night are done together in order to provide plentiful

opportunities to practice the love of God, and to assist each other on the journey. There

are important rhythms to the day and to the season, and hours are adjusted to

accommodate seasonal changes. Work is done not as a creative endeavor in itself, but for

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[7] It wasn't until the late 19th century that some groups of Christians began to emphasize a literal
interpretation of biblical texts (Armstrong, 2010, pp. 94–96), which may be surprising to many.

the good of the common life and the discipline it provides to prevent acedia. Rule 48.1, reminiscent of St. Anthony's angel, reminds practitioners: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul." The monks also remained in the monastery where they began, providing a sense of stability; the monastery is considered to be their home. Benedict believed the surest way to holiness was through honest and authentic relationships with others; a true testing ground.

In his Rule, which became the basis for many monastic communities after him, St. Benedict (480-547) presents 12 degrees of humility for his monks, which, once ascended, would bring the monk to the love of God, which he said casts out fear. From this point on, obedience is no longer due to the fear of hell, but comes from one's love for Christ. All of the steps are challenging, however, the seventh step of humility is particularly difficult for people of contemporary Western ideologies to understand. It states, "one not only claims with the tongue to be inferior and worse than everyone else, but actually believes it with deep feeling of heart" (RB 7.51). This runs contrary to contemporary competitive and personal ego building efforts, many of which are found in post-secular spiritual development contexts. Is it possible to see these ancient teachings with new eyes? Acknowledging the potential for oppressive misuse, Benedictine Columba Stewart claims,

> Within Benedict's context of God's abiding presence, however, these are words of liberation, not of oppression. They promise freedom from the burden of creating and maintaining a (false) public image. They invite the fearful self behind the mask to hear a new voice. (Stewart, 1998, pp. 57–58)

Often, spiritual teachings of the past are discarded with little or no understanding of their initial meanings or contexts, without taking the time to determine how this wisdom might be interpreted and used to enrich our lives today. A shallow or uninformed interpretation makes it tempting to write off teachings or practices that seem unsettling or disturbing in our context; but what gets lost in an unreflective process of rejection? Is there inherent wisdom here that can be translated for contemporary sensibilities?

The end goal and purpose of monastic spirituality was and continues to be perfection and union with God in the kingdom of heaven; that is, the attainment of eternal life. However, the immediate goal is "purity of heart, without which no one can gain that end…" (Cassian, 2010, p. 5). Purity of heart enables one to leave behind the desire for material wealth and possessions, but it must be attained with love. "Therefore, fasting, vigils, meditation on the Scriptures, self-denial and the abnegation of all possessions are not perfection, but aids to perfection: because the end of that science does not lie in these, but by means of these we arrive at the end" (Cassian, 2010, p. 8).

St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) provides a good example of this approach, with his own unique twist. He believed his work was "to give people reasons for spiritual joy" and not just tell them what they should or shouldn't do. Everything and everyone were included for Francis; revealed in the Franciscan motto "My God—and all things." The "…Rule of St. Francis could basically be described as 'Tips for the Road' in comparison to the beautiful Rule of St. Benedict, which is guidance and plan for a stable community" (Rohr, 2014, p. 55). The most basic practice of the first Franciscans was mendicancy, which naturally placed them with the marginalized and on the outskirts of society.

Francis's spirituality was traditional, but also in many ways new, in that he offered fresh ways of thinking about the teachings of Jesus. For example, he believed spiritual seeing enabled one to broaden their understand of the incarnation from being just about Jesus, to include all of creation. For Francis, human suffering instead of human sinfulness was the focus and the entryway to transformation and divine union, a very different approach from the early monastics. It is said that Francis emphasized practice over theory, and lived between orthodoxy and heresy (Rohr, 2014, p. 86), immersing himself in the realities of the world, instead of escaping from them.

We learn from these pre-modern spiritual forerunners that being "spiritual" involves a process of transformation, and the only way transformation is possible is through action and discipline, both of which lie at the heart of traditional religious and spiritual practice. The values and practices highlighted in traditional Christian spirituality include prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, kindness to the poor, faith, freedom from wrath, hospitality, humility, piety, love, work, community, and prayer. Also necessary are adherence to sacred texts, obedience to authority figures, and placing the needs of other community members, and the community itself, above one's own.

Modern Spirituality

These values and themes have endured in modernist forms as seen in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Monastic and religious orders continue, with the addition of lay people as co-members. The Second Vatican Council heralded a renewed interest in communal spirituality, as the Roman Catholic liturgy was made more accessible and the Church expanded its ecumenical and inter-religious outreach.

Protestant efforts included an increase in devotional Bible reading and the development of hymnody and catechetical teaching. Prophetic-political and mystical types of spirituality emerged in the 20th century, led by figures including Charles de Foucault, Evelyn Underhill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and others (Sheldrake, 2013, pp. 175–186). All of these people were informed and compelled by their religious faith to live the values of Christianity, continuing the legacy of those who came before them.

It has been said that "Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart" (Armstrong, 2010, p. xiii); this sounds like a very contemporary concern. People still want to discover new capacities of the mind and heart, but many no longer look to religion to facilitate this. The willingness to devote time and effort to this goal are evident in many contemporary spiritual seekers, however, it often seems to be more of an individual project than a communal one. How do traditional Christian approaches to spirituality compare to the values and practices promoted in some post-secular spiritual approaches?

Contemporary Post-Secular Spirituality

Contemporary understandings range from spirituality as essential to human nature,[8] something which has been lost or repressed by the practice of dogmatic religion, to a narcissistic relativism promoted by New Age thinkers, providing a "religion lite" well-suited to a consumer mentality and fickle practitioners. What is the purpose or goal of post-secular spiritual praxes and disciplines? In the history of Christian traditions, we

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[8] See (Taylor, 1992).

have seen that practices and disciplines were tied to *learning* to be spiritual, the search for meaning, or yearning for connection to God. Spirituality or connection to the Divine doesn't just happen; one must commit to the effort and the risk of deprivation, heartbreak and disappointment, as well as the inherent joys and illuminations. This means engaging in potentially transformative practices in the work of developing one's inner life. The inner life requires attention and care, and the purpose of this inner development was traditionally understood as being able to serve God and others. The church community used to be where this happened; however, as we have seen, spirituality and religion have parted ways for many in contemporary society.

Much of the contemporary post-secular spirituality project seems to imply that spirituality is innate; not something to be learned, but rather brought to awareness and built on. Contemporary spiritual practice is often claimed as a way to raise awareness and connection; but awareness of and connection to what? Research reveals an emphasis on mining the spiritual "depth" of everyday life and living an ethical life. Also, study respondents focus on experiences of transcendence, something out of the ordinary, a "fullness" in life as described by Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2007). Central to this evolving understanding of spirituality is an increased effort among a diverse array of people to define one's self in opposition to religion, with research confirming this increasingly accepted differentiation (Pew Research Center, 2012). In this process, nuance is often lost, and the pitting of one against the other as though they are mutually exclusive makes enemies of concepts that once informed and enriched each other.

The studies we're using here explore how this differentiation between religion

and spirituality is being lived. Through qualitative research and quantitative analysis with

a diverse range of people in the United States, Ammerman invited respondents to identify

for themselves how their practices and ways of living are "spiritual," and learned that

there is much overlap between religious and spiritual language, despite claims of

distinctiveness. By listening to how people integrated their understandings of

"spirituality" into telling their everyday narratives, Ammerman developed a "taxonomy

of meanings," (Ammerman, 2013b, pp. 263–264) for the term, and from these clusters,

what she calls "cultural packages." Eleven meanings or definitions of spirituality

emerged from this study: "Spirituality Is:" (1) A religious tradition (identifying with or

participating in); (2) Ethics (living by the Golden Rule)[9]; (3) God (acknowledging and

experiencing Divine presence); (4) Practices (activities toward spiritual development); (5)

Mystery (not explainable by ordinary means); (6) Meaning (wholeness and purpose in

life); (7) Belief (in God); (8) Connection (transcendent sense of connection to others); (9)

Ritual (symbolic invocations of spiritual presence); (10) Awe (transcendent sense of

wonder and beauty); and (11) Self (sacred inner uniqueness of the person). These

definitional categories of spirituality are comprehensive and provide depth insight into

the ways people within and outside of religious traditions use the language and concept of

spirituality.

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[9] As one of Ammerman's respondents asserted, "Real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one
characterized by helping others, transcending one's own selfish interests to seek what is right"
(Ammerman, 2013b, p. 272).

The patterns and clusters in these responses led Ammerman to distinguish four "cultural packages:" The Theistic (experiences of the sacred in relation to gods and goddesses), The Extra-Theistic (those who experience the sacred outside of religious contexts, but may also be active church members), Ethical Spirituality (what she calls "Golden Rule Christians"), and Belief and Belonging Spirituality. She names this last category as contested between those who participate in religious communities and those who have rejected such participation. She identifies the majority of her respondents as spiritual *and* religious; however, those who identify as spiritual but *not* religious derive from this last category.

Is the identity named as spiritual but not religious really a new understanding of religiosity, or just a convenient handle? In my own experience, people adopt this label easily with inconsistent and often unsatisfying justification. Exploring lived religion through the explanations of those who are living it, Ammerman acknowledges that practitioners may not be able to clearly articulate the antecedents of or reasoning for their choices, but instead tend to rely on their feelings. The contemporary emphasis on personal authority is also revealed, which has important implications for the continuing evolution of spirituality and religion, as well as the development of fluid and temporary spiritual communities; both of which will be explored further as we seek to understand and assess new ways of being spiritual.

Mercadante's study of self-identified spiritual but not religious people illustrates many of the ways people cobble together meaningful practices from different traditions (Mercadante, 2014). She chose to study this group in order to better understand the

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changes in spiritual and religious belonging and practice widely observed today, and to "ferret out the inchoate theology" in this population (Mercadante, 2014, p. 234). Her findings confirm the transition of authority from religious leaders to the self, an eclectic mixing of religious and spiritual practices from many traditions, the belief in the interconnectedness of all humanity, the image of an "on-call" God who is available as needed, and a commitment to personal growth which, for a number of respondents, naturally led to making a contribution to the larger world.

Among her younger SBNR interviewees, Mercadante discovered an emphasis on personal transformation, a "therapeutic" spirituality that encompassed improving one's health and relieving stress. The practices of tai chi, yoga and meditation were common among this population, and were seen as contributing to one's happiness and psychological fitness. Many viewed these as spiritual pursuits, although completely devoid of religious overtones (Mercadante, 2014, p. 56). They were identified as spiritual because they tapped into the "fullness," the "something more" that helped one to cope with life's challenges. Additionally, for many study respondents, being able to rely on one's intuition was a necessary requirement for living outside of traditional religious affiliation. One becomes his or her own authority, a divine self. People may turn to a teacher to learn from their experience, but this person is not viewed as an authority figure. Through reading and exploration, people learn to heal their emotional selves, and stay true to their authentic selves, which are continually being revealed. Individual talents and abilities, once understood to be God-given for the benefit of the community are now

seen as means for constructing the self and the responsibilities of community membership

are sometimes viewed as important only in the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

Post-Secular Mediated Spirituality

Many post-secular spiritual offerings are consumer oriented, mediated in the form of

books, blogs, on-line classes, and audio-visual products. As an example, a cursory survey

of *Huffington Post* articles posted under "GPS for the Soul," reveals an emphasis on

personal happiness, positive thinking and self-love

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gps-for-the-soul/) (Various authors, 2015). The focus

is on making one's self feel better with little substantive advice or attention to suffering

or other difficult life situations. This site (and many others) represent the understanding

and face of "spirituality" for many people today, and superficiality is often a common

denominator. Another example of spirituality in popular cultural discourse can be found

on the website www.entheos.com (Johnson, 2015). Here, husband and wife Brian (aka

"friendly philosopher + CEO") and Alexandra Johnson (aka "fun lovin' chief goddess")

present a variety of options for the spiritual seeker. They also host a Facebook-inspired

site called *The Oasis* where like-minded people can share what they're thinking about.

Some of the offerings on this site are free and others come at a cost. *PhilosophersNotes*,

for example, offers "220 books condensed into 220 6-page PDFs for more wisdom in less

time," which enables one to "discover the interconnection between the eternal truths," for

$10 per month. Authors include Confucius, Wayne Dyer, Eckhart Tolle, Epictitus,

Nietzche, Joseph Campbell, Marcus Aurelius, Pema Chodron, Rumi, Thich Nhat Hahn,

Victor Frankl, and others.

Although "spirituality" is not specifically invoked, many of these authors are writing from religious traditions, about traditionally spiritual topics. The categories in the *EnTheos* course offerings are also analogous to traditionally spiritual categories: "Happiness, flourishing, optimism, purpose, self-awareness, goals, actions, energy, wisdom, courage, love and connecting to the highest wisdom within yourself." This quick and easy, one-stop shopping approach to spirituality is representative of what I am inclined to label some of the most egregious co-option and commodification of spirituality today. Their "secret sauces to awesomeness" (Johnson, 2015) seem to cheapen and make superficial deep spiritual wisdom that developed in communities with shared experience and beliefs, and I find it challenging to include these approaches as authentic manifestations of spiritual expression. Those who study the spiritual but not religious population help to contextualize this by pointing out that people today have inherited, not created the current reality of fundamental changes and splintering in religious institutions: "…they have had no choice but to try to make meaning with the bits and pieces they find lying around…" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 243). This makes sense, even as it is challenging. I question whether "bits and pieces" have the potential to be meaningful, and if a spirituality dependent on a consumer model, apart from any sort of communal affiliation, has the capacity necessary for social transformation or is instead destined to be a tool for personal transformation only.

Another concern is how post-secular understandings of spirituality accommodate virtues and values such as compassion and forgiveness. A contemporary spirituality dedicated to replacing negative feelings with positive ones leaves unaddressed the

realities of suffering and offense in actual lived situations. These "transactional realities" are often glossed over, incapable of being fully explored in the "language of feelings," and separated from their ethical origins (Bregman, 2014, pp. 53–56). This can result in a surface approach to critically important human interactions, and an inadequate spiritual or psychological depth, which is necessary to address conflict.

There are also, however, positive ways to view these developments. Mercadante's call to view this population as "The Dynamic Nones" is a powerful corrective to the view that religious and spiritual activity takes place only in a church and only in approved and prescribed ways. This claim also offers challenges to those imbedded in traditional religious institutions and their leaders. In an effort to appeal to those who are looking elsewhere for spiritual meaning, some churches have lightened their traditional doctrinal message, focusing instead on ethics, spiritual practices and personal wellness (Mercadante, 2014, p. 251). Some view this as a watering down of faith resulting in a loss of awe and wonder that is often the very types of experience the SBNRs are looking for. The contemporary practice of sampling in building a spiritual identity as understood in the SBNR ethos is not unique to this population. It has also been adopted by those who remain in religious traditions, as they pick and choose which beliefs, teachings and practices are most meaningful to them. The idea of "buying" into the whole worldview and premise of a religious tradition is an outdated concept, although complete buy-in was probably never as universal as it was promoted to be. Many churches today recognize that they need to provide something other than what a seeker can find at a local Crossfit studio or meditation group. Despite these efforts, for many of the SBNR study

respondents, the assumptions about authority and community that come with church membership are viewed as just too much baggage.

Comparing Understandings of Spirituality

The spiritual in Christian spirituality refers to the Spirit of God. In the examples above, we have discovered the importance of discipline, community, love of God, salvation, spiritual practice, adherence to sacred texts and obedience to the authority of the church and its representatives. In the post-secular spirituality of the study respondents, spirituality is understood as an innate quality that can be enhanced through using one's talents and developing new ones to construct the self. This development leads to becoming one's own personal authority, not reliant on an outside figure or organization for direction or structure, although open to learning from others. Feelings play a large role in assessing one's path, and community is often experienced in fluid and temporary ways. Although these sound quite different, there are commonalities, including an ethical bent, an appreciation for mystery and awe, a commitment to human flourishing, finding and making meaning in the events of one's life, the importance of relationships and the development of the inner self. The two contrasts that would seem to cause the most conflict include the understandings of authority and the expectations around community.

In the next two chapters I will introduce our conversation partners: Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, representing a traditional strand of Christian spirituality and the multi-media publishing company *Sounds True*, representing emerging post-secular spiritual expressions; engaging their understandings of religious and spiritual authority and community.

Chapter Three: A Strand of Catholic Christian Spirituality: Karl Rahner

Twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner consistently taught that God desired relationship with humanity, and that this gift was free to be accepted or rejected by God's creation. His pastoral concerns in relation to God's engagement with humanity and his understandings of religious authority and community are helpful for this project. Rahner was firmly established in Roman Catholicism, and so provides a representative voice of a particular Christian spirituality. At the same time, his engagement with ecumenical dialogue and his belief that God works outside of traditional religious boundaries, make him a helpful conversation partner in the work of this dissertation. As he wrote, "Grace permeates the Church and its structures, but the church does not exhaust the grace of God" (Pierce, 2010, p. 185). Rahner is acknowledged as one of the most influential Roman Catholic Christian theologians of the 20th Century, writing from the 1930s to the 1980s, an era that encompassed the Second Vatican Council (Pierce, 2010). He resided in a tensive space where he challenged ecclesial authority while claiming allegiance to it, and encouraged the faithful to question teachings in order to be faithful to God's potential. Rahner believed that the gift of God's self to humanity and the capacity, desire and freedom to respond to it are given to all people, and that human beings are on a life-long search for an answer to the origin and destination of life. This is his

articulation of the spiritual quest, and for Rahner, the Christian community offers the optimal context for this effort.

When asked by an interviewer near the end of his life if there was one theological question he viewed as most important, Rahner responded:

> Is human existence absurd or does it have an ultimate meaning? If it is absurd, why do human beings have an unquenchable hunger for meaning? Is it not a consequence of God's existence? For if God really doesn't exist, then the hunger for meaning is absurd. (Rahner, 1990, p. 163)

Rahner's belief in God's existence and God's desire for intimate relationship with creation, especially through a process of co-creating meaning, form the basis for his work and theology. The following introduction will contextualize Rahner, his voice, and his continuing relevance to both traditional and contemporary expressions of spirituality.

Biography

Rahner was an author, theologian, philosopher, professor and Jesuit priest, born in 1904 in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. He entered the Roman Catholic religious order of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in 1922 and in his studies was influenced by modern German philosophers and Ignatian spirituality. Rahner was ordained in 1932 and, after completing his Jesuit formation, began his study for a doctorate in philosophy at Freiburg University, where he studied with and was shaped by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Rahner was identified with other Catholic students who became known as the "Catholic Heidegger School," which was "an effort to unite Heideggerian insights with a reinterpretation of the thought of Thomas Aquinas" (Michaud, 1994). In fact, his dissertation entitled *Geist im Welt* (Spirit in the World) was rejected by his dissertation

director because of Heidegger's influence on it. He moved to the University of Innsbruck in Austria to complete his doctorate in theology and became a faculty member at Innsbruck in 1937.

Although Rahner changed his doctoral studies from philosophy to theology, he maintained his belief in the importance of the integration of philosophy and theology. He practiced philosophy within theology, emphasizing that one's experience of God and being human and one's reflection on that experience is of a whole. Traditional academic inquiry at the time saw philosophy as human understanding vs. theology as divine revelation, and believed study of the two should remain separate so as to maintain the difference between the human and the divine. Rahner believed that human experience *implies* experiencing God, and that the reflection on this is inseparable from one's faith (Siebenrock, 2010).

After the Nazi takeover and his expulsion from Innsbruck in 1938, Rahner moved to the Pastoral Institute in Vienna, teaching and serving as a pastor. Biographer William Dych was with Rahner during this time, and has written about Rahner's work as a parish priest, obtaining food for the needy and providing pastoral care for his parishioners (Dych, 2000, p. 9). Five years later, at age 39, Rahner continued to reflect on the horrific events of the time. He sensed that the church needed new approaches to theology, drawing on existentialism and phenomenology, as well as looking to Biblical texts and the teachings of Jesus (Krieg, 2004, p. 173) in his reflections. Rahner later wrote with regret about choosing to continue his work in the relative safety of Vienna: "…we should have done much more to protect…the skins of other people, of non-Christians, than we in

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fact did" (Rahner, 1985, p. 37). He greatly admired the work and sacrifice of his former

student Fr. Alfred Delp, a member of the Kreisau Circle, who was executed as a

resistance fighter in 1945 (Rahner, 1984, p. 40). The Kreisau Circle was made up of

about 20 members including representatives from the military, academics and religion,

who opposed Hitler and the Nazi Party, and wanted to make plans for their country for a

future time when Hitler was no longer a threat. Rahner referred to Delp as a martyr, and

called for others to stand by their convictions even at the risk of death with more courage

than he was able to (Rahner, 1984, p. 51). In addition to questioning his own response to

National Socialism, he also questioned, in retrospect, why Pope Pius XII and the Catholic

Church did not offer a stronger public opposition. Acknowledging the horrors of the time

many years later, Rahner was still not sure what he or the Church should have done,

calling the time "collective madness" and "basically unexplainable" (Rahner, 1984, p.

51). He returned to Innsbruck in 1948 to continue his teaching and writing career, moving

to the University of Munich in 1964. He later accepted a position at the University of

Munster, from which he retired in 1971, and he died in 1984 in Innsbruck, Austria.

     The war years and his self-confessed lack of courage or even knowledge about

what to do during this time may have influenced the future beliefs he held and expressed,

including his interactions with the hierarchy of the Church. In an interview near the end

of his life, Rahner responded to a question about his history of conflict with Church

officials about his writing and teaching. Citing the inherent unknown challenges of the

many places a Jesuit can be sent to serve, he says "…one does not get so frightfully

worked up about getting into occasional difficulties with Rome over one's theological

work" (Rahner, 1984, p. 63). Surely the horrors of Nazi Germany also provided perspective for him, enabling him to act courageously as a theologian responding to the complex realities of people's lives. His work on the creation of the Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* among others, reflected his belief as well as that of other German theologians, that the Church should serve as a moral advocate, promoting justice, human dignity and non-discrimination. He wanted the Church to more clearly understand and articulate its role and responsibilities, so that in the future it would be in a position to more effectively address social injustice and oppression than it had during the Nazi years.

Work and Conflict

The ongoing conflicts Rahner experienced with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church were mainly due to his creative methodologies and suggestion of the possibility of structural change in the Church. In 1962 he was informed that he was under pre-censorship by Rome, meaning that he had to obtain permission from his superiors before speaking or publishing. The Vatican's concerns were primarily around his thought on the Eucharist and Mariology (the theology and understanding of the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus) (Michaud, 1994) These topics are of foundational importance to Catholicism, although the nuances of Rahner's thought were likely of more concern to the Vatican than to the average Catholic. It was somewhat of a surprise then, when near the end of 1962, he was appointed as an expert advisor or *peritus* to the Second Vatican Council.

With the election of Pope John XXIII in 1958, the Church entered a new era of self-reflection, and Rahner played an important role in the Council as an expert advisor. In his opening address to the Council on October 11, 1962, Pope John said,

> The Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth inherited from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced in the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate. (Abbott, 1966, p. 714)

Rahner took these words to heart both in the official Church documents he contributed to at the Council and in his own writing. A large part of this work is dedicated to an understanding of Jesus and the role he plays in the lives and salvation of all people, not just Christians. He believed salvation transcends history and religious categories by focusing on people fulfilling their destinies, as accompanied by and in union with God. This notion of individual transcendence provides a point of connection and a larger frame in the effort toward mutual respect for diverse ways of connecting with God.

For Rahner, human experience was always the starting point for theological reflection. This was problematic for some in the Catholic hierarchy and even surprising considering the milieu in which Rahner was educated. One Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation was a questioning of whether one's personal experience of God was authoritative for belief, or whether one believed because they were taught to by the magisterium of the Church (Rahner, 2004, p. 13). In this latter view, God's presence with humanity was beyond human understanding, and human experience had nothing of value to offer this mystery. Against the dominant thought of the time, Rahner argued that

through God's incarnation in Christ, "God has also become human experience" (Rahner, 2004, p. 2014), thus making experience of God accessible to all.

His fundamental thesis is the self-communication of God to human beings: God's invitation to share in the divine life, an invitation that humans are free to accept or reject. Rahner calls the capacity to desire and achieve a share in God's life the "supernatural existential" (Rahner, 1982, p. 128), and he believes it is given to all people, not only Christians. This reality exists before grace is even offered; it is a participation in God's being. Rahner's understanding of grace and nature teaches that God created human beings in order to be God's self in the world. He wrote: "Humanity is designed and projected as the medium of God's self-expression. Humanity is created as the grammar of God's self-utterance"(Vandervelde, 1988, p. 450). Critics accused him of blurring the line between human and the divine, thereby denigrating divine revelation. Rahner was criticized by theologian Hans Kung as being too dualistic in his theology of nature and grace, and by Jurgen Moltmann as not dualistic enough. American theologian Paul Molnar accused Rahner of "reducing the triune God to his naturally known God" (Molnar, 1985, p. 229). For Molnar and others, Rahner had erased traditional ideas of God's transcendence. Molnar also criticized the notion of "supernatural existential," saying that if everyone has this capacity, then it's not a freely given gift, but rather just part of being human and, therefore, not a means of intimate divine/human communication (Molnar, 1985, pp. 245–246). Supporters of Rahner's ideas suggested his was simply a more comprehensive approach to the effort to help people understand their experience of an incarnated God in daily life and in human history.

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Rahner viewed the Church as integral to Christianity, although he believed there was not just one right way to organize it. While he critiqued Christianity and acknowledged its need to evolve, he wrote: "It is, however, neither dead nor surpassed. It remains the absolute religion" (Rahner, 1990, p. 159). God's self-communication through grace and Jesus are directed not only at the individual person, but also to humanity as a corporate whole. The "absolute" Church thus provides the best opportunity for meeting the human needs of social and communal interaction necessary to respond to God's grace. For Rahner, salvation history and the history of the world exist together. They are not the same, but neither do they exist in separate spheres. "Christian fidelity is not a matter simply of preserving a heritage unsullied, but rather of courageous engagement with what is new, with what seems strange" (Rahner, 2004, p. 28). He does not hesitate to critique the institutional church, warning of the temptation to hide behind an idealized image. He encouraged its involvement with local cultures and ways of living.

Rahner was often branded a "liberal" in a derogatory sense; however, he himself never intended to be anything other than an orthodox Roman Catholic theologian. He wrote, "I am a Catholic theologian who attempts an absolute loyalty to the Magisterium of the Church to rethink Catholic teaching" (Rahner, 1990, p. 52). However, as one reviewer wrote, "Rahner firmly believes that orthodoxy does not mean fundamentalism" (Sheehan, 1982). This distinction continues to be contentious in Catholic circles today.

Anonymous Christianity

Rahner's concept of the "Anonymous Christian" derives from his Christology, or understandings and beliefs about Jesus. He acknowledges the conundrums presented by

religious pluralism including the challenge to the absolute claims of the Christian faith, while still believing that Christianity provides the answer for all of humanity. In Rahner's theology of grace, God desires the inclusion and salvation of all people; the means for salvation, then, are available in every culture and historical situation, even those for whom the ultimate Christian divine revelation of Jesus is not known or believed. This occurs through the practice of faith, hope and love; capacities inherent in all the people God has created and willed into being. It is the action of the Holy Spirit that enables this and that makes Christ present even when he is not known. The relationship with Jesus Christ is built, even if not acknowledged, by anyone who builds a relationship with God and lives up to his or her human potential in his or her own religious and cultural environment.

Rahner's work on anonymous Christianity, while criticized as anti-Christian by some, opened people's minds to more inclusive notions of God and the Church and paved the way for modern ecumenical and inter-religious movements. Rahner's ideas about anonymous Christianity were criticized by some (non-Christians and Christians alike) who deemed it imperialistic and judgmental (Marmion, 2005). Others, including Moltmann, felt Rahner did not put enough emphasis on the uniqueness of the Christ event or on the importance of Christianity itself. Catholic teaching had long argued that only adherence to the Christian tradition offered salvation, and the idea that the Christ event could have universal significance continued to be controversial. The notion that a people, culture or religious tradition without an awareness or acceptance of Jesus could know God, be moral and even have the capacity for salvation was not widely held in the

Catholic world at that time. Rahner believed that all people have experienced God and divine grace, and if they denied it that did not make God's grace any less real. If they did not have the self-awareness to articulate it, then it was an "anonymous" experience. Regarding the controversy over his ideas around anonymous Christianity, he wrote:

> I am quite indifferent to the word itself. If for religious, pedagogical, or other significant reasons it is found to be dangerous or open to misunderstanding, then simply drop it. What I affirm is that, at least since Vatican II, there can be no doubt that those who have been divinized by God's grace in faith, hope and love are not identical in number with those who explicitly believe in Jesus Christ and are baptized. (Rahner, 1990, p. 167)

Throughout his career, Rahner asked existential questions about the meaning of human life and faith: What is the relationship between faith and reason? What is the nature of God? How do humans come to know God? Are all teachings of the Church unchangeable? If Christianity is the one, true faith, then what does this imply for people of other cultures and traditions? (Rahner, 1982). Throughout his lifetime, he was concerned with putting the Christian tradition into conversation with the current issues of the times. There are those who claim Rahner's work was tied to his own era, however, many of his questions remain important and relevant. Rahner's insistence on the presence of God in human experience continues to challenge the Church's claims to authority, and this quite radical notion still has relevance in a postmodern context that holds many competing ideas in tension. The concrete forms of modernity are not Rahner's. In a quite postmodern way, Rahner challenges any religion that claims to have all the answers. One commentator suggests that the real argument between Rahner and conservative critics is about the nature of revelation: "whether the subversive freedom of God…can occur also

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outside conventional church structures, and in ways not recognized by conventional constructions of Christianity" (Endean, 2005, p. 289). That is surely a question for contemporary religious debate, and relevant to this project. We turn now to Rahner's understanding of religious pluralism.

Religious Pluralism and Shared Human Experience

In Rahner's understanding of religious pluralism, he downplayed the clash of cultures predicted by some and instead focused on basic similarities between people, including the belief that all human beings are created by a God who desires to be in communication and relationship with them. Knowledge of and belief in Jesus might not be a commonality, but the human experiences of love, freedom and knowing are themselves indicators of God's presence and the loving gift of God's self. This possibility is meant for all, but everyone has the choice to accept it or not. For Rahner, this acceptance and openness to God was most fully seen in Jesus who becomes the model of one who lived to his full human capacity. This theology of revelation enabled Rahner to express unity in diversity and allowed Christians to see how God was already at work in people of other faith traditions. While opening the Church to a wider view, Rahner still believed that Christianity was the ultimate goal and best hope for all people. Their salvation was not at stake; however, their own personal fulfillment and depth of understanding and experience was.

Rahner's notion of a universal religious experience or a common human understanding is criticized by some contemporary theologians as reducing "religions to a lowest common denominator as different expressions of the same thing" (Marmion,

2010, p. 13), and as a contradiction of postmodern thought. He can perhaps be forgiven

for this, as it wasn't until the 1990s that the absolute distinctiveness of religions came to

be articulated, valued and studied (Knitter, 2002, pp. 172–191). A "soteriological

typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism" (Moyaert, 2012, p. 25) reveals the

complexity in scholarly thought that was beginning to develop just before Rahner's death

in 1984 and beyond.[10] We are also much more aware today of the potential for and reality

of damage done in the name of religious unity and a supposed common ground. Reducing

religious understandings and worldviews to sameness enabled "discrimination and

oppression based on ethnic, racial, sexist, economic, and all kinds of difference"

(Doehring, 2015, p. 3).[11] Rahner's starting place puts him at odds with those who argue

for the distinctiveness of different faith traditions, but also with Christians who believe

the Church needs to emphasize its differences in order maintain its strength and visibility

in a post-Christian era. I believe Rahner would have grown along with the evolution of

thought on this topic as he demonstrated throughout his life. In *Foundations of Christian*

Faith and other of his works, Rahner insisted that the purpose of theological activity was

not simply to repeat past teachings, but rather to engage with the ongoing revelation of

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[10] Moyaert notes this typology was first used in theology by Alan Race (1983) and then by Gavin D'Costa (1986); succeeding work on pluralism continued to engage these themes.

[11]For more see:
Lincoln, Bruce. 2008. Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
McGarrah Sharp, Melinda A. 2013. Misunderstanding Stories: Toward a Postcolonial Pastoral Theology. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.
Prothero, Stephen. 2010. God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter. New York: HarperOne.

God in contemporary human issues. Rahner was not downplaying the importance of Christian tradition and beliefs, but he recognized that theology was increasingly being done in a wide variety of worldviews and philosophical systems, and that Christianity needed to be open to this. The age of Eurocentric dominance was fading, and religious pluralism was an inevitable and even positive development in salvation/world history.

Rahner's work, of immense significance in his own time, becomes significant in new ways today in both the intellectual and the personal spheres. He embodied the process of transitioning from one era to another in Catholic Christianity through his ideas of inclusivity, challenge to the status quo, mining the riches of the tradition and modeling openness and belief in a present and loving God who desires relationship with creation. For Rahner, this God has new gifts to give in every generation, and the human structures built to facilitate and support this must be open to these new possibilities. Irish theologian Declan Marmion has written extensively on Rahner's thought and its significance for present times. He claims, "Rahner's concern was that theology would petrify into a self-enclosed discourse disconnected from the challenges and criticism of other disciplines and from society" (Marmion, 2010, pp. 20–21). This plea for an interdisciplinary theological approach continues to be relevant, as different factions within the Catholic Church have unevenly adopted it. The contemporary reality includes a Pope who is eager for wider, more merciful engagement with the faithful, at odds with many conservative Bishops who view this as relativizing church teaching.

In the move from an exclusive Catholic theology to a more inclusive one that acknowledges the value and validity of other faith traditions, as well as a more inclusive

view of salvation, the Church today stands on the shoulders of Rahner in ways many don't even realize. The starting point has changed and his ideas, which seemed so radical in the last half of the 20th century, are now implicit in the Church's approach to pluralism and inter-religious dialogue. An example is the recent encyclical by Pope Francis, Lumen Fidei, "Light of Faith." Reminiscent of Rahner's thesis that God desires salvation for all, the Pope writes, "Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God" (Pope Francis, 2013, paragraph 35). Pope Francis echoes Rahner's ideas that were so influential during his time and which continue to resonate.

His ideas about grace, the "self-communication of God," his belief in God's desire for the salvation of all people, and his critique of Church structures which he viewed as potentially impeding the work of the Holy Spirit, continue to be compelling today. Many contemporary scholars see potential for the adaptation and further development of Rahner's ideas; "using Rahner to go beyond Rahner" (O'Leary, 2010, p. 34). Rahner provided a model of intellectual liberation for Catholicism in the mid- to late-20th century; however, he was still deeply entrenched in the tradition in many ways, and was therefore unable to fully live into the liberation of questioning many of the long-held assumptions of the Church that he proposed (O'Leary, 2010, p. 38).[12] It was Rahner's desire that Christianity become a world church and he recognized that, in order for this to happen, the Church needed to remain open, not resting on its revealed "truths" as the final answer for itself or for anyone else. Only through relationship and dialogue with the rest of the world could this be possible. The further development of this key

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[12] See (Vass, 2004)

intent of Rahner's will potentially enable Christianity to "be able to bring something specific and particular to the table of dialogue, but equally important it will be able to receive something from the other religions within dialogue" (Lane, 2010, p. 219). This is one of his lasting legacies, and foundational to his understanding of his responsibility as a theologian.

The Role of a Theologian

Rahner had a distinctive understanding of the role of the theologian:

I want only to confirm the experience that theologians are worthy of the title only when they do not seek to reassure themselves that they are providing clear and lucid discourse, but rather when they are experiencing and witnessing, with both terror and bliss, to the analogical back and forth between affirmation and negation before the abyss of God's incomprehensibility. (Rahner, 2005, p. 358)

Rahner held a tension unique in his day between orthodoxy and necessity in his relation to the Catholic Church and the movement of God's Spirit in the world, who he believed was always presenting new possibilities and encounters with novel situations and opportunities. The vault of Christian teachings and understandings could never be closed for Rahner because in his view, the Church needed to remain open to the newness of God in human and salvation history. The challenge he presented in this tension was difficult for some and liberating for others, as it remains today, and is one reason why Rahner's work continues to be important.

As an illustration, the Vatican's Synod on the Family was held in October of 2015. On the opening day of the Synod, an article by Michael Brendan Dougherty was published in This Week Magazine, titled *Does Pope Francis fear God? On the Synod of*

the Family and the fracturing of the Catholic Church.[13] Dougherty is convinced the

Catholic Church is about to fall into apostasy as it discusses a more pastoral approach to

divorced and remarried Catholics and gay and lesbian people, and he lays the blame at

the feet of Pope Francis with his "agenda-driven" appointments of less doctrinally-

inclined bishops. He predictably traces the beginnings of this sacrilege to the Second

Vatican Council, and to the Catholic right's favorite scapegoat, Karl Rahner:

> Theologians like Karl Rahner substituted new theologies for the Mass that specifically suppressed any understanding of it as a propitiatory sacrifice. Across the world, altars and altar rails were smashed, statues and confessionals thrown in the dump. Thomas Cranmer, a leader of the English Reformation, must have laughed from his grave.
>
> A novice student of religious studies can recognize what happened. If all the physical and verbal aspects of worship are changed, and the very rationale of the act is changed, then you are not reforming a people's religion, you are substituting a new one in the old one's place. This act of substitution is in the language of Rahner's writing on the Mass, where the priest becomes a mere "presider" — or worse, a "president" — and the church becomes an "assembly." And so, quite naturally, most Masses in most modern churches have exactly the wan atmosphere of a high school assembly. The church now puts sanctimony in the place of sanctity, therapeutic self-acceptance in the place of holiness, "participation" in the place of devotion, and love of man where once was the love of God. Ultimately, man is substituted for God himself. (Dougherty, 2015)[14]

A student of religious studies, novice or otherwise, might point out that this is exactly

how the Church has always evolved, in conversation with the changing needs of

contemporary culture and a trust in the work of God's Spirit through events and people.

As Rahner wrote, "But if I'm honest, I have to say that I get the impression that, because

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[13] "Catholic Church" here means the authority of the Magisterium.

[14] Dougherty's work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *ESPN Magazine*, *Slate* and *The American Conservative*.

of its defensive posture, the Church is in danger of retreating into a new ghetto. The Church doesn't want this lack of convergence, but in point of fact it grows again anyway" (Rahner, 1990, p. 33). Obviously, fear of change in the church is nothing new.

Rahner and Mysticism

Central to Rahner's thesis is his articulation of mysticism. Rahner believed the path of the mystic is open to all those who assent to the possibility of encountering God, surrendering one's self to this unknowable yet somehow known entity and searching for God's presence in all of the activities, people and events of one's life. This mystical relationship demonstrates "both an intimate familiarity with the conversation partner and a reverent awe, a sense of God's closeness and of God's incomprehensibility and vast grandeur" (Rahner, 2010, p. xv). As lofty as this sounds, mysticism is simple and accessible in Rahner's view. It is about encountering God, the mystery, something larger than one's self; particularly relevant in a secular milieu where so many claim to be searching for meaning, purpose and transcendence. Mysticism doesn't just happen, however. The mystical way of knowing God is a result of effort and desire; an intentionality of purpose and resolve to recognize the presence of God in all of human experience. Although Rahner greatly admired the ancient Christian mystics and believed their approach was important, he also stressed the need for each age and culture to translate this experience in light of their own situations and needs. The mystic engages with the times, and the seeker must take that seriously as well.

As opposed to the Scholastics, Rahner encouraged moving beyond learning *about* God to a personal and experiential knowing *of* God. This approach, he argued, had its

own theological authority, and in conjunction with Church teaching offered a more comprehensive and meaningful approach for people. Thus, they would come to "understand that they have an implicit but true knowledge of God…a genuine experience of God, which is ultimately rooted in their spiritual existence, in their transcendentality, in their personality…" (Rahner, 1990, p. 115). This every day mysticism he referred to as "…the finding of God in all things, the sober drunkenness of the Spirit mentioned by the Church Fathers and ancient liturgy, which we dare not reject or disdain just because it is sober" (Rahner, Imhof, & Biallowons, 1986, p. 297). Ultimately, the language of mysticism was unnecessary for Rahner chiefly because of the transcendent, elitist images the word conjures, which he saw purely as embellishment to the normative reality of God's immanence, acknowledged or not. It is more about mystery, which for him "consists in being able to grasp rationally that the incomprehensible really exists. That is the highest act of human understanding" (Rahner, 1990, p. 160). And it's not just for the believer; he claims the agnostic or atheist who "loves in courageous fidelity to the demands of everyday life lives the mysticism of everyday life" (Rahner, 1984, p. 4). For the seeker or the believer, however, there is a longing to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the Divine; a deep dive into the unknown where some entity, whether spiritual practice, a community of like-minded others or a teacher can provide companionship and direction. For Rahner, the Church was this companion and guide, however imperfect and in need of reform it might be. With this introduction to Rahner as a foundation, we move to an exploration of his articulation of religious authority and community as well as his critique of the Church in these areas.

Religious Authority

Many of the insights into Rahner's ideas about authority are found in his spiritual writings as well as the numerous interviews he conducted over the years, as opposed to his more scholarly work. However, one does find references to authority throughout his writing. Rahner consistently encouraged engagement with the world outside of the church, believing God's activity did not cease at the church door. He acknowledged God's presence even amid the growing cultural disenchantment with religious and secular authority and the turn to the value of experience instead of allegiance to an authority outside of the self. His understanding has been characterized as "a faith based on experience over against one that is ecclesiastically pre-formulated, and a plurality of voices that are of equal value over against a singular voice that makes all final decisions" (Rahner, 2010, p. xiii). The inner voice of authority develops with one's own experience of God; a person comes to know for him or herself how to build and grow a relationship with God through personal and collective spiritual practices including meditation and prayer and in the case of Catholicism, celebrating the sacraments. This implies an active and engaged human search for the Divine or for a more meaningful and fulfilled life in the case of non-believers. Rahner scholar Annemarie Kidder asserts that Rahner "is found addressing the concerns of both believers and non-believers in their quest for meaning, for a fulfilled life, for a life that finds its origin and its end in what some people call 'God'" (Rahner, 2010, p. xiv). For Rahner, the growth of the importance and turn to the inner voice of authority was partly prompted by the Church itself. In "The Shape of the Church to Come," published in 1972, Rahner is speaking to the German church

specifically, but the entire church as well. In this work, while acknowledging the authority of the Magisterium, Rahner exhorts Church leaders to root their teachings in the authority of the Gospels (interpreted in complex ways through biblical hermeneutics) instead of their ecclesial roles. The time where people simply accepted "authoritative" statements from Church leaders had passed and many of the blindly accepted traditions should be challenged. In his later years Rahner further expounded on topics in need of contemporary interpretation including the over-clericalization of the Church, birth control, priestly celibacy, inter-communion, women's ordination and ecumenism (Rahner, 1974, p. 6).

Rahner accused the Church of being at times "spiritually lifeless," describing it as "dominated to a terrifying extent by ritualism, legalism, administration, and a boring and resigned spiritual mediocrity continuing along familiar lines" (Rahner, 1974, p. 82). Including himself in the critique, Rahner asks church officials to consider the relevancy of the teachings of the Church to the average man or woman making their way in the world, for whom the ideas of God, Jesus or salvation are not part of their daily vocabulary or even in their field of thought. He asks how religious leaders are to bridge this divide as preachers or if it is even acknowledged. Again accepting his own complicity, he asks if they ever talk about joy, glorious grace or liberation or if it has ever happened that their "pious and learned words sound even to [themselves] like an intolerable bla-bla" (Rahner, 1974, p. 84). This self-reflexive critique is characteristic of his honest and forthright approach.

Acknowledging the contemporary period of transition in understandings of authority both secular and religious, Rahner challenges those in authority to place their focus on the future and its evolving needs, instead of trying to preserve structures developed in times with different needs. Respect for Church authority in the future, Rahner writes, will not be based on the office held but "by being genuinely human and a Spirit-filled Christian" (Rahner, 1974, p. 58). He writes about the need for priests to have an "ineffable core that is a pierced heart" (Rahner, 2004, p. 126), suggesting this is the only way authority and mission can be transmitted in a grace-filled and effective way. The faith and authenticity of Church leadership will provide believers with the freedom and the courage to be "obedient," with the assurance that directives are not simply based on custom, maintaining a clerical culture, or that are disconnected from their lived reality. Rahner says this is possible only if leadership can admit to uncertainty at times, accept criticism and not " behave as if they have a direct hotline to Heaven to obtain an answer to each and every question in the Church" (Rahner, 1974, p. 59). The clerical humility Rahner is calling for seems idealistic and far from much of ecclesial reality, even as Pope Francis appears to be taking his words to heart.

Writing about the responsibilities of a theologian and his own experience, Rahner acknowledged the difficulty with publicly stating legitimate criticism of the Church. Although there may be different ways to accomplish this, he wrote "…still a Catholic has the obligation to retain certain forms of respect toward the pope and the bishops" (Rahner, 1990, p. 11). This respect also applies to doctrine, which Rahner believed were teachings that were directed to the needs of people. For Rahner, the purpose of doctrine is

to assist us in deepening our connection with and relationship to God. This is not some divinely revealed, abstract truth, but was developed as a response to human experience. Of course, Church officials have wielded doctrine in non-pastoral ways, and this is what Rahner objected to. This is also echoed today by Pope Francis, who in his closing remarks at the Synod of the Family in October of 2015 said, "True defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas but people; not formulae but the gratuitousness of God's love and forgiveness" (Francis, 2015). Rahner acknowledges that any theologian who chooses to critique the Church has to expect that there will be pushback, but this should not keep the theologian from speaking out. It is, in fact, an obligation to criticize practical directives "when they are too quickly perceived as being the practical directives for all action in every age and place" (Rahner, 1990, p. 30). Once again we see his emphasis on the new movement of God in every age and our responsibility to take this into account in decision-making. His is indeed a postmodern liberative pastoral theological method, although I don't believe he would have employed a "postmodern" label for himself.

For Rahner, the individual also has an obligation to critique the Church and its teachings. He articulates this very clearly in his published conversations with young people. In response to a youth who asks about obedience to the Church, Rahner says: "No Christian is obliged to a blind, corpselike obedience which only says yes and amen" (Rahner, 1990, p. 96). He likens this to having a disagreement with one's parents, saying you can disagree about something and continue to love each other. Rahner clearly states his belief about the role of the Church's teaching authority: "The Church is the mediator

and guarantor of my life in unity and solidarity with God…obviously this has nothing to do with infantile attachment to the Church or with a clerical identification with all that goes on in it" (Rahner, 1990, p. 145). We are called to a mature and informed discernment in our engagement with the authority of the Church. And, "In the case where someone is unable to accept the claim of Jesus and of Christianity as truly binding on himself or herself, then he or she is in no way obliged to accept it" (Rahner, 1990, p. 149). The primacy of individual conscience, a foundation of Catholic Christianity, applies to all.

There is an interpretive task inherent in engaging with Church authority. One must understand what one is adhering to and why; mere parroting of Church teaching is inadequate. However, Rahner acknowledges that there are some "truths" which are not open to rejection even after study and interpretation. His response to these instances: "What is open to question is the degree to which I must positively affirm it" (Rahner, 1990, p. 152). The validity of any teaching is found in resonance and inner authenticity: "…these channels of grace from outside are only of any use if they meet the ultimate grace that comes from within" (Rahner, 2004, p. 69). This is another expression of his deeply held belief in the authority of human experience. Rahner was eager that the authority of the Church not get in the way of God's Spirit. The movement of the Spirit should always precede what the Church comes to sanction, he taught; the Spirit is beyond law, doctrine and dogma.

Rahner did express some regrets near the end of his life. "I'd like to have had more love and more courage in my life, especially with respect to those who have

authority in the church. But I'd also like to have shown a deeper understanding of the contemporary person and his or her way of thinking" (Rahner, 1990, p. 39). For Rahner, the contemporary person who may be outside of the institutional church is a vital member of God's community and creation, and it is to Rahner's understanding of religious community that we now turn.

Religious Community

Community was an important value for Rahner. "We human beings are important for each other" (Rahner, 2004, p. 105), he said simply. In his view, we share a heritage, the reality of God's grace and companionship in God's drama:

> And in this drama it becomes clear what God has really thought about humanity. It is only these thousands, innumerable thousands of variations of humanity, in their harmonies and in their contradictions, that go to make up the one history of the world and together bring about what was really meant when God spoke in the beginning: 'Let us make humanity in our own image and likeness.' (Rahner, 2004, p. 107)

This quote reveals the inevitability of diverse community for Rahner as well as its deeply inclusive nature. God's community is incomplete without the variations.

In a seemingly prescient (if somewhat limited) view of the future, Rahner asserted that there would be two basic types of spirituality and piety that would manifest in the years to come. The first he termed "a wintry spirituality," characterized as people who are nominally Christian, even attending church and praying, but who are "going through the hell of modern rationalism" (Rahner, 1990, p. 35). The second he identifies as "newer enthusiastic or charismatic movements," where there is "an almost naïve immediacy to God, bordering on a naïve faith in the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rahner, 1990, p. 35).

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Interestingly, he encourages the Church to support those whose spirituality is "wintry" even though it is tempting to pay more attention to the enthusiastic. A contemporary assessment of Catholic practice suggests that "wintry" practitioners are being edged out in some dioceses due to their lack of doctrinal zeal, and I believe this is contributing to the ever-growing exodus from the Catholic Church. It is difficult to feel part of a community when leadership questions one's motivations, adherence to dogma and commitment, as the thesis of this dissertation suggests and anticipates in the voices of research respondents.

Rahner acknowledges that the community of the institutional Church itself has to change. In an interview in 1982 regarding the future of the church and the world, Rahner observed: "The one Church of the future will not be the Roman Catholic Church in the form that it exists today. It will be marked by a legitimate pluralism…a much greater pluralism than that which has existed in Roman Catholicism" (Rahner, 1990, p. 161). He goes on to describe what he views as a needed decentralization of church governance and an end to a solely Eurocentric moral ethic in a radically connected and diverse world.

He also acknowledges the changing dynamics in parish membership and church attendance as he responds to an interviewer's suggestion that the Church is an obstacle for many who wish to encounter God. "In no way would I dispute that the Church in its actual pastoral practice, with its legalism, its ritualism, its concern about itself instead of God can be an obstacle to such an experience of God" (Rahner, 1990, p. 111). He also faults priests who are more concerned with administration than spiritual inspiration, but reminds the interviewer that the practice of religion is not "simply the private affair of a

human being in a safe little room" (Rahner, 1990, p. 111). Also important is the social

communal aspect, however, this comes with responsibilities. Unlike "youth sects" which

can flourish and then quickly die once interest and emotions wane, "in the sociality of a

genuine community of faith certain demands arise automatically; sacrifice and

renunciations are expected" (Rahner, 1990, p. 111), ostensibly leading to longer lasting

communities. The concepts of sacrifice and renunciation, however, are increasingly

losing their appeal, another fact confirmed in interviews with the SBNR.

Rahner distinguishes between two different understandings of church community.

He writes, "If I understand it only as a more or less well-structured organization for

mediating religious expectations and experiences, then for me…it has no real religious or

theological significance" (Rahner, 1990, p. 142). He contrasts this with an understanding

of community that "belongs to the very stuff of my existence, my conduct, my faith, in a

word, my life" (Rahner, 1990, p. 142). He acknowledges the annoying, disappointing,

and even scandalous behavior that goes on in Church communities, but challenges people

to look beyond the negatives to the fact that the Church is God's and part of the salvation

story. In an interview in his eighties Rahner talked about his reaction to those who ask,

"Shall I still remain in the Church?" His answer:

> The question drives me crazy. For me as a believer it is in the last analysis
> meaningless. What can the word 'still' mean here? It is like asking whether I will
> 'still' be a human being, or whether I will 'still' live in this pitiable twentieth
> century…The point for me is that Christians remain in the Church in spite of all the
> anger they might feel about it. (Rahner, 1990, p. 143)

For Rahner, the Church reflects the messiness and the brokenness of the rest of life and to

expect otherwise is unrealistic and beside the point. When asked about the "Christ, yes;

the Church, no" movement of the day, he imagines a conversation among those who are

fed up with the institutional Church:

> Let's separate from it and found an enthusiastic fellowship.' At some point someone
> is going to have to announce: 'We are meeting next Tuesday at 5 o'clock, and you my
> Spirit-inspired brothers and sisters must all be there.' Then the problem will arise
> where to get the chairs and where to find the money. Finally someone will have to be
> chosen treasurer just as it was with Jesus' community. In other words, it won't be
> very long before you have an institutional Church, that is an organized Church with
> legal structures. (Rahner, 1990, p. 146)

In the same interview, the questioner suggests that if the most important commandment

in Christianity is to love one's neighbor, one doesn't need a church to accomplish that.

Rahner replies that loving one's neighbor means infinitely more than providing food,

clothing and shelter. If one believes union with the Divine is the greatest good, then one

wants others to share in this, and for Rahner, the Church provides the best structure

through which to accomplish this.

Addressing the phenomenon of people leaving the Church in a 1984 interview,

Rahner says that although all of the blame can't be placed on the Church and its

representatives, priests, bishops and the pope should focus on making the Christian way

of life more engaging and relevant. His suggestions include a more accessible liturgy, a

positive and joyful proclamation of the Gospel message and placing into perspective

matters of morality. He pleads for sharing the story of "God's self-communication in his

glory in more lively, joyful, I might even say, lighter fashion than we often do in our

sourpuss pastoral ministry" (Rahner, 1990, p. 175).

Speaking about the opportunities for Christianity, also in 1984, Rahner talks about

Christianity as a diaspora and asks whether the model of local parishes is still viable,

suggesting instead an "oasis" model. He says that these would be "living, radically

cohesive communities that resemble the life of the early Church" (Rahner, 1990, p. 193).

He cautions, however, against letting them become "ghettoes that produce a lot of warm

nests which don't warm the rest of the world at all. They'd be like thermos bottles that

keep warm what is inside but leave anything outside cold" (Rahner, 1990, p. 193). For

Rahner, belonging to a Christian community implies a personal commitment and

openness to change, not a blind recitation of doctrine or adherence to rules. The Church

does not stand in for God and is not a representative of God. "The Church truly acts as

itself only where, and only insofar as, it…is open to God, just as God exists both as

God's own self and as God for us…the God who is God becomes present in the Church"

(Rahner, 2004, p. 135). This giving and receiving of God's self happens most fully in

human community, and this is why the Church is necessary for the spiritual life. He

makes a distinction here, however, in understanding the role of the Church as

indispensable and "the mindless, uncritical loyalty that immature authority often

demands" (Rahner, 2004, p. 145). Rahner's own writing and teaching demonstrated the

tension he held between loyalty to the Church and justified critique of it. He explores this

tension in a publication of prayers written in the 1960s. Reflecting on the Church's role in

his life, he acknowledges the Church as the "home and foundation" of his faith. He goes

on to write, "But because it is also the Church of wretched sinners, it can vary in *how far*

it is the foundation and home of my faith. It can make it both easier and more difficult for

me to believe in you and your victorious love for me" (Rahner, 2004, p. 148).

An example of the diversity of Rahner's writing includes published letters and responses from young people about issues of the day titled *Mein Problem: Karl Rahner Answers Young People.* The book came from a parish visit in Vienna and the follow up questions students sent him. One letter is titled "To Love God, I Don't Need Any Church," written by an evidently thoughtful young man whose concerns echo those of contemporary SBNR people. He points out the Church's dubious actions in the past, claims that praying the Rosary is like praying a recipe, questions what for him is the game of having one's sins forgiven and then turning around and doing the same thing, and claims that the rituals of the Church are empty. He asks for clarification because he wishes his faith was stronger and that he didn't have such negative feelings about the Church. Rahner's reply is direct, honest and challenging. He admits to laughing about the rosary and recipe comment and offers some wisdom about the value of repetitive prayer to bring people a sense of peace and centeredness. However, it is on the topic of community where Rahner goes deep in his response. Rahner suggests that the individualism of the past seems to be changing toward a desire for community among young people; a sense of belonging.

> But if a community isn't just going to be an interest group that will soon break up, but really give people a lasting basis for their life, then this kind of structured—indeed we have to say institutional—community requires individuals to fit in, to be disciplined and selfless. (Rahner, 2004, p. 160)

He goes on to say that only by giving one's self fully to a community does one realize the blessings of a community, again comparing it to a family as he had previously done. He acknowledges peoples' authentic experience of God in nature and other settings, but asks,

"Could it not be that people come more closely and more radically toward the infinite God through the Church and with the Church, or that there are experiences of God that they can only have in the Church?" (Rahner, 2004, p. 161).

Rahner also challenges the young man's statement that "someone who really believes doesn't need any symbols for it." He replies, "Are you a person with body and soul? Surely what goes on in the most intimate center of your personality must inevitably express itself in what the body does" (Rahner, 2004, p. 162). He makes the point that the deepest parts of ourselves are expressed through symbols and symbolic actions; music and art are examples of this and he questions why our relationship with God would be different. He closes by encouraging the young man to give it time. "The next step is that you have to learn to give—patiently, kindly, readily—and not just take. Then you'll grow into the life of this community of faith. Try it" (Rahner, 2004, p. 163). Among the hurdles keeping people from making this type of commitment today (or even making a decision to join a church) are a basic distrust of religious leadership and moral disagreement on issues of sexuality and gender, as well as an understanding of belonging derived less from experience than contemporary rhetoric.

Despite Rahner's openness to and awareness of God's presence in every human life, whether acknowledged or not, for him, the Church provides the most comprehensive path to living the Christian life. Community is essential for Rahner and the authority of the Church, despite his struggles with it and challenges to it, is the place where the fullest life happens. Near the end of his life, he wrote: The church was and remained for me transparent to God, and the specific place of this ineffable relationship I had to the eternal

mystery " (Rahner, 2004, p. 166). He continually sought to assure the relevance of the

Church, to encourage it to speak anew to the needs of each generation by being open to

the movement of the Spirit and listening for God's voice.

Conclusion

Rahner's diverse approaches to engaging the reality of God and of spiritual

experience took the forms of prayer, poetic prose and of course theological language.

Despite his inherent optimism, he wrote of a "wintry" season or spirituality, and this

understanding was multifaceted for Rahner. He began using the language in 1973

(Rahner, 1990, p. 5), perhaps in response to the perceived lack of progress on the

initiatives begun at Vatican II, and certainly in regards to the reality of the fading of the

importance of institutional religion in Central Europe. On one hand it implied barrenness,

revealed as a lack of interest in religious matters among the young, but because Rahner

believed the Spirit of God was active in the world, he was also hopeful that this wintry

season would naturally transition to new life and growth. Rahner identified "indifference"

as opposed to hostility to religion as the obstacle to the recognition of the mystical in

everyday life. Because of the absence of religion or God in thoughtful public discourse,

and the growing numbers of people leaving churches, he believed it was only through

deep awareness of and connection to the inner self, a radical self-awareness, that a

conviction of God's presence can arise and be known (Rahner, 2004, p. 64). This is the

basis for Rahner's famous quote at the beginning of this work:

> The believer of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all—if by
> mysticism we mean, not singular parapsychological phenomena, but a genuine
> experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence. The spirituality

of the future will not be supported or at any rate will be much less supported by a sociological homogeneity of its situation; it will have to live much more clearly than hitherto out of a solitary immediate experience of God and God's spirit in the individual. In such a situation the lonely responsibility of the individual in his or her decision of faith is necessary and required in a way much more radical than it was in former times. (Adapted, Rahner, 1981, p. 149)

Karl Rahner was a theologian important to his time and our time as well. His complex ideas about the role of religious authority and community, held in the tension of the obligation of the theologian and individual to critique and challenge, speak to his understanding of God and to contemporary realities about spirituality and religion. God is beyond human constructs, and the structures meant to facilitate connection with God also have the potential to obscure and even block this connection. His belief in a God who desires intimate relationship with God's creation drove his conviction that people are to work for the betterment of society and justice for all people. When asked at the end of his life about the threat of nuclear war and mass destruction and the possibility that good people can do nothing to stop this he replied,

> But even if a people or even humanity were to fall into the abyss, then I would still be firmly convinced—and I hope to keep this conviction—that even such an abyss always ultimately ends in the arms of an eternally good, eternally powerful God. (Rahner, 1984, p. 111)

This belief provided the bedrock for his life and work.

Chapter Four: Contemporary Mediated Spirituality

Belief in the God Karl Rahner wrote and preached about, and the spiritual assumptions that came with that belief, have obviously continued to evolve. Individual religious and spiritual identity construction is common today, as people learn about spiritual practices and understandings from a wide variety of traditions and blend them to create something personally meaningful (Hoover, 2006). Contemporary digital media culture plays an important role in emerging spiritual/religious identity construction, enabling new ways of mediating ideas, creating communities and providing a vast spiritual marketplace. Although evolving religious and spiritual understandings and practices are not new, the access to and availability of so many voices, blogs, products and examples of how others have constructed their spiritual identities make it easier and even compelling for spiritual seekers to do the same.

Forms of mediation are actually "lenses through which we engage the world around us" (Mahan, 2014, location 497); and they serve to create and shape our spiritual and religious understandings, indeed our own identity. One's religious identity is no longer assumed to be inherited from one's parents, and, indeed many people are unable to be part of something they can't accept as a whole. An example of this are Catholics who disagree with the church's teaching on abortion, women's ordination, and/or the church's stance toward the GLBTQ community. They may love the richness of the tradition and

the spiritual resources it offers, but feel they are condoning the contested teachings by remaining part of the tradition. Of course, many choose to bypass this dilemma altogether; belonging to a traditional religious community is not desired, nor is it seen as important to go to the trouble of constructing one's own religious or spiritual identity. These people are the not spiritual and not religious, and they don't identify a need for spiritual seeking or desire spirituality or religion at all. For our purposes, we are focusing on those who do self-identify as seekers but who are dissatisfied with traditional religious communities and their beliefs and practices for a variety of reasons. This includes people who have completely left the traditions as well as those who stay affiliated but search outside of it for meaningful practices, spiritual learning or community, all of whom can be understood as SBNR.

Spirituality and religion have always been mediated (Mahan, 2014); that is, communicated in word, action, image and ideas. What changes over time is the method of mediation. The process of the transition to new forms can be threatening or unsettling to religious traditions and spiritual practitioners who fear potential losses and challenge to authority and structure. Legitimate concerns are expressed, including the ramifications of the use of elements of traditions that are no longer grounded in their original disciplines or meaning systems. Appropriated elements may include beliefs, practices, objects and images (Mahan, 2014, location 847). Douglas Burton-Christie describes the positive aspects of this phenomenon:

> Gradually, we are beginning to understand the myriad ways in which both Christians and non-Christians improvise their spiritualities, drawing freely and eclectically upon a range of spiritual traditions, often with relatively little

attention to the way in which the established traditions set the terms of belief. Concern has grown over what some see as a tendency toward the erosion of coherent belief and practice capable of being transmitted from one generation to the next. However, these developments surely signal something else, which is undeniably positive and creative: the desire to discover spiritual meaning in spite of the perceived inability of established religious traditions to provide it. It suggests a vitality and elasticity to the human capacity for transcendence which must, after all, lie at the very root of any meaningful understanding of spirituality. (Burton-Christie, 2010, p. 480)

The sampling and construction process is not always seen in a positive light, even by those who engage in it. A recent *Huffington Post* article, "Is There a Techno Spirituality?" (Campbell-Tunks, 2015), serves as an example. In this article, Campbell-Tunks extolls the virtues of the Web and online connections for how these digital resources open up the world for learning, and make available experiences of transcendence and communion with others, which she says once were only found in traditional spiritual and religious realms and organizations. She acknowledges the shortcomings of digital interaction, but insists that "engaging with our devices" to experience the fantasy of games, relationships in online communities (spiritual and non-spiritual) and a release from our daily realities, provides a needed enhancement in life. A student of mine recognized the benefits of more connections and the possibility of wider communications, but wondered if the plethora of options for on-line interaction comes at the expense of lived experience and personal relationships (Duncan, 2015). This student self-identifies as SBNR, and hopes to one day create and shepherd a spiritual community to serve this population. Concerns about this approach include the potential for spiritual voyeurism, a consumerist mentality toward spirituality and a lack of in-depth understanding about the traditions the appropriated practices derive from. What we miss

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out on by abandoning actual face-to-face human interaction includes the "messiness" of

individuals and institutions, the very mix that our Christian spiritual forebears claimed

led to wisdom and spiritual growth. Engaging in "worship" along with a community via

live stream, for example, may be edifying and personally satisfying, and even necessary

for some who have been traumatized by the Church and its representatives, but wish to

remain connected. However, there are inevitable losses inherent in foregoing relationship

building and community engagement, including healing, authentic connection and depth.

This is a compelling critique from what may be seen as a surprising source. Clearly, the

ability to draw from many traditions and ideas is facilitated by contemporary digital

media, and some examples of the role it plays in the continuing evolution of religion and

spirituality will be helpful.

Digital Resources for Spiritual Seekers

The evolution of digital media has led to a new accessibility, with previously

neglected voices now able to join the public discourse on religion and spirituality. This is

positive, however, these changes in power and systems have also opened the door to

work that is at times "sloppy and narcissistic" (Mahan, 2014, location 1469). There are

multiple competing voices, as well as new opportunities for religious and spiritual

leadership and participation. It is more common today for people to belong to a variety of

"spiritual" communities, however they may define that understanding. And, perceptions

of leaders and authority figures may be based more on charisma and one's ability to

effectively communicate in the digital sphere than on one's educational preparation for

their role (Mahan, 2014, location 1502). Although there are web-based spirituality

resources that are sorely lacking in depth and substance[15], here we will explore some

more constructive examples, which aim to serve the SBNR population and other spiritual

seekers.

The OWN Network

Oprah Winfrey's OWN Network (http://www.oprah.com/index.html) is a multimedia

collection of television shows, classes, merchandise for sale in the "O Store," and access

to her magazine "O." Topics covered in these areas include forgiveness, happiness, health

and wellness, inspiration, food, home, fashion, beauty, books, quotes, community

conversations and more. Teachers include Rob Bell, Brené Brown, Deepak Chopra,

Ianlya, Arianna Huffington, Brendan Burchard, and Shawn Achor, as well as Oprah

herself. Oprah has been held up as an icon of the American cultural context, especially as

it relates to changing understandings of religion and spirituality (Lofton, 2011). In many

ways, Winfrey's offerings actually *describe* contemporary religion. Her "favorite things,"

what she likes, believes and needs

> …are not just product plugs but also proposals for a mass spiritual revolution,
> supplying forms of religious practice that fuse consumer behavior, celebrity ambition,
> and religious idiom. Through multiple media, Oprah sells us a story about ourselves"
> (Lofton, 2011, p. 2).

Although critical commentary on this phenomenon is appropriate, the validity of this

expression of spirituality calls for engagement by religious scholars. The performance of

spirituality and religion is happening in these spaces as well as in more traditional

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[15] For example, see www.entheos.com. A specific example is one of their classes titled "How to Strengthen
Your Spirituality" which epitomizes the anti-intellectual and shallow approach often found in this genre:
https://www.entheos.com/academy/classes/how-to-strengthen-your-spirituality

religious venues, and we lose much of the thick description necessary for comprehensive

analysis by ignoring it. Burton-Christie reminds us of this:

> Another important instance of critical correlation that the Christian community is called to is the work of attending carefully and thoughtfully to those expressions of spiritual longing that arise outside the Christian tradition. Here, I mean to include not only the spiritualities of the major world religions, but also the many, often hidden, expressions of such spirituality that fall outside the conventional boundaries that we normally think of when we are evaluating the locus and meaning of religious practice and consciousness. (Burton-Christie, 2010, p. 480)

One of Oprah's multimedia offerings is "Super Soul Sunday;" a series "designed to

help viewers awaken to their best selves and discover a deeper connection to the world

around them" (Winfrey, 2015). This Emmy award winning series features Oprah in

conversation with authors, thinkers and spiritual teachers including Franciscan priest

Richard Rohr, TV producer Shonda Rhimes, spiritual guru Eckhart Tolle, Whole Foods

co-founder John Mackey, past-life regression expert Dr. Brian Weiss and many more.

According to the website, the topics for discussion include "What happens to us when we

die? What's the meaning of life? Why are we here?" (Winfrey, 2015). Not claiming to

have answers, the purpose of the conversations is to explore big questions from a variety

of perspectives. These are certainly spiritual themes and areas of concern that religion has

traditionally addressed. Winfrey is asking them outside of traditional religious contexts

and including conversation partners who might not otherwise be heard from.

Another digital endeavor is *Patheos*, which bills itself as "the premier online destination to engage in the global dialogue about religion and spirituality and to explore and experience the world's beliefs" (http://www.patheos.com/About-Patheos/About). Since 2008 *Patheos* has been providing resources and a place for spiritual and religious discussion and inspiration, appealing to a wide variety of users. Resources include interactive tools to compare religious traditions, a library of world religion writings, and blogs, articles and commentary on contemporary religious issues. In 2014 they announced that they had crossed the 6 million unique monthly visitors mark, which places them in the top 500 websites in the United States (https://www.quantcast.com/top-sites).

Their "channels" include Atheist, Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelical, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Pagan, Progressive Christian and Spirituality. Each of these channels includes news, practices, and inspirational offerings within that specific tradition. The Spirituality channel encompasses a variety of "spiritual paths and possibilities," including "yoga, astrology, mindfulness, health and healing, and spiritual practices in everyday life." Although there is a focus, even on the Spirituality channel, on news and analysis, there are also articles and suggested practices aimed at spiritual development and inspiration.

There is also a store on the site offering merchandise including hats, mugs and shirts, as well as books, videos, seminars and e-courses. There is a special section for "Seekers" which includes surveys to explore religious beliefs, articles including "10 Top Books for

Every Belief System," and stories from a variety of spiritual seekers and what they've

learned along the way, offered as a guide for others. The Public Square connects and

engages people around contemporary issues and the big questions of life. They have their

own press, and require PhD credentials for those who wish to write for their library

resources. There are also a book club, resources for faith and work and an "Ask an

Expert" section where religious leaders respond to questions about their faith traditions.

Articles and blogs on entertainment and religion as well as family resources round out the

offerings of this comprehensive endeavor.

The sheer amount of information results in an unsurprising lack of scholarly depth.

As one critic described it,

> *Patheos*…seems to have assigned the verisimilitude of articles to a range of
> denominational gatekeepers whose role is essentially to ensure that the articles reflect
> a kind of average piety toward their subject. Nothing too scholarly, nothing too
> critical, and thus nothing too right. (Hoffman, 2010)

This is not presented as a scholarly project, however, and I have found the materials I

have accessed to be interesting and potentially helpful for a contemporary spiritual

seeker. Theological analysis and historical detail, however, are best found elsewhere.

Sounds True

Both Oprah's OWN Network and *Patheos* are intentional about offering resources

for spiritual and religious knowledge, growth and practice, and despite critique, provide

products that many seem to value. In an effort to more deeply explore the motivation for

a digital media focus on spiritual offerings, I interviewed the founder and CEO of a

similar effort, aimed toward a similar audience. *Sounds True* is a multi-media publishing

company founded in 1985 by Tami Simon whose intent was to "disseminate spiritual wisdom" (Simon, 2015a). *Sounds True* employs more than 80 people at their headquarters and recording studio in Louisville, Colorado, and includes a library of over 1500 titles. Their offerings represent major spiritual traditions, as well as humanities and the arts. Their commitment to "multiple bottom lines" is clear in their mission statement:

> The mission of *Sounds True* is to find teachers and artists who serve as a gateway to spiritual awakening and to produce, publish, and distribute their work with beauty, intelligence, and integrity. We treat our authors, vendors, and partners in the same way we would want to be treated. We work flexibly and efficiently together to create a cooperative, loving environment that honors respectful authenticity and individual growth. We maintain a healthy level of profitability so that we are an independent and sustainable employee-owned organization. (Simon, 2015a)

The company's publishing formats include spoken word audio, audio learning courses, books, interactive learning kits, music, and instructional DVDs. *Sounds True* also has a partnership with Eckhart Tolle TV featuring teachings from the author and opportunities to attend retreats. Their products are presented in the following categories: Spiritual Journey, Health & Healing, Relationships, Meditation and Music. Health, healing, relationships meditation and music are familiar and widely accepted inclusions in contemporary understandings of spirituality. Here, I will focus on the offerings specifically labeled Spiritual Journey, which actually encompass many of the others as well. Authors here include Pema Chodron, John O'Donohue, Thich Nhat Hahn, Jack Kornfield, Mirabai Starr on Teresa of Avila and Frances of Assisi, Daniel Siegel on Neurobiology, Ram Dass, Alan Watts, Father Thomas Keating and many others; with over 900 products in total within this category. The company's vision is holistic, seeking

to adopt "qualities of consciousness and compassion" as taught by those they publish, in their business dealings, the way they treat employees, a number of environmental commitments, a prison library project, and donations to charities and not for profit organizations. The integrity of this holistic approach is foundational to their stated core values.

In my interview with the founder and CEO of *Sounds True*, Tami Simon (Simon, 2015b), I began by acknowledging the difficulty inherent in settling on a definition of "spirituality." I asked how she uses and understands the term.

I want to begin by saying you're stepping into an area with a lot of dialogue and lack of clarity here at *Sounds True*. It's not like we have a firm position on this; there are a lot of different perspectives. Not just about what it is, but the pros and cons of using the term. The cons are, it's meaningless; so many different meanings turns off a lot of people; it's sometimes associated with talking to dead people or something very metaphysical... What a lot of people are doing in today's world…they're wanting to communicate values such as being present, kind, compassionate…using the term "mindfulness." It has become all the rage…avoiding anything that sounds like "spirituality." So we're bringing *mindfulness* into the workplace, we're definitely not bringing *spirituality* into the workplace. If you bring spirituality in you're opening yourself up to this religion or that religion; people think 'you're not telling me what to believe,' but if you just say…we're going to be mindful in our work together, that's acceptable.

There are a lot of pros to this approach: people say we're moving into a secular arena that doesn't use the word 'spirituality' and we're going to be able to reach a lot more people. We're seeing a lot of our authors, Buddhist trained authors, who are saying we're not going to use the Buddha word, we're not going to use any special terminology, we're just going to talk about mindfulness and compassion and being reflective. So that's the con to using the word spirituality.

Simon accurately captures the contemporary angst of the language of spirituality. The turn to "mindfulness" and values including compassion, kindness and reflective thinking is a common way to separate one's self from the religious connotations that "spirituality" can raise. Thus, one can uphold the same important values, and allow others to approach without fear of the imposing of belief or dogma; especially important in a commercial enterprise.[16] I was somewhat surprised, then, by how eager Simon was to defend the language of spirituality and the personal importance she places on the idea of mystery. She continued:

I still use the word spirituality and it's important to me, so despite those cons, the reason it's important to me is because I think there is a wringing out of the mystery, a taking out of mystery and proclaiming that the journey to the

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[16] A thought-provoking example of this was a recent conversation I had with a woman who identifies herself as a "Mindful Leadership Consultant." She offers classes to students and business leaders, promoting self-inquiry, generosity and compassion. She spoke at length about the importance of these values as well as mindfulness, centering, being in the present moment, learning to appreciate silence, and even offering a description of the neuroscience of meditation. When I mentioned that many of these skills and practices are directly drawn from religious traditions, she seemed surprised and said that she saw these concepts as part of a new consciousness. She has a bachelor's degree in business, worked in IT for ten years, and is now promoting herself as an expert in "mindfulness" without any acknowledgement of the religious or psychological underpinnings of what she is teaching. Her mindset is reflective not of choosing to leave behind religious and spiritual roots, but of not even realizing they exist.

indefinable source of life, the origin of life, depth of meaning, can actually be explained in sort of human terms, where the human is actually in charge of our mindful activity, our compassionate giving. There's a leaving out of mystery, which I find offensive. Offensive is kind of a strong word, actually, but I think it's inaccurate to make people think this is a *human* endeavor, a human project, instead of a *transcendent* project expressing itself in and among other ways as human.

So I think it's really important not to leave the spirit out. So then the question is how do we talk about it, how do we define it, and that's not easy! And I don't have one pat answer, except that I want to continue to try to stand in it. I like the word mystery, and the fact that there's something mysterious at the depth, center and heart of our lives that we can't quite name, pin down, or ever fully use language to describe. But we can feel it, we can know it and for many people it's the single most important thing actually in their life… not just to be in contact with that, but to let that be the central moving force of their entire existence, and we can call that spirit if we like.

A word that I like in addition to mystery is presence, a feeling of presence, of being. I thought it was interesting that Krista Tippett, who is a radio interviewer that I quite like changed the name of her to show to "On Being," and I thought, so, she picked up on that and I think that quality when you're a spirit-infused being, just like presence, is something that is very contactable by people. It's a quality of presence, and we also know we're present with other people and

people are present with us and how valuable that is and in many ways it's what

we value the most, and if we can have more of it, wouldn't it be fabulous? So we

say that person brings such a beautiful presence. Those are words that I kind of

like, but I also just like saying that there's something mysterious going on. What

is it? We don't know.

The concept of mystery comes up repeatedly in connection with spirituality. The

acknowledgement of mystery is foundational for Rahner; he describes it as "both an

intimate familiarity with the conversation partner and a reverent awe, a sense of God's

closeness and of God's incomprehensibility and vast grandeur" (Rahner, 2010, p. xv). In

Ammerman's study, she found that over half of her respondents "linked spirituality with

mystery…[something] more than everyday reality" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 26). This

concept is also echoed in Charles Taylor's articulation of "fullness," the sense that there

is meaning and possibility beyond what seems rationally knowable (Taylor, 2007).

At this point in our conversation, I was curious about Simon's motivation and

background. On the website and in other interviews, she talks about her goal of

"disseminating spiritual wisdom." I asked her about the impetus for this.

I had as a young person a desperate need to both be of service and to find

a way to be part of the world. I dropped out of college, Swarthmore College, and

I'd been in the religious studies department, but I had only been there for two

years…in my sophomore year there was someone there from Sri Lanka who had

been a Buddhist monk for 16 years of his life and he was teaching Buddhist

existentialism and Buddhist ethics and he and I became really good friends. So I

left at the end of my sophomore year and went to Sri Lanka, then to India and Nepal and started studying meditation.

So there was this great kind of longing in me. I wasn't going to finish my academic degree, and at that point in time, my sense of religious studies and academia was that personal experience was not very welcome, at least at Swarthmore at that time, in terms of the papers I was writing. I was interested in personal revelation and I thought that any mystic that was worth their salt, *that* was what they would be interested in, and yet the academic professors weren't interested in hearing what I had to say, so I was like 'I'm outta here.'

I knew that meditation is this incredibly powerful thing, and although I didn't fit in the academic world, I wanted to keep learning. I wanted to learn more about the inner journey and I was kind of lost. It's not that unusual to imagine someone at 20, 21 in that place. And it was really through a fortuitous series of events that I started a volunteer radio show. I was interviewing somebody, and as part of the interview process I got to know him. I had inherited a small amount of money. I said to him I don't know where to put this money. He said, 'Why don't you put it in yourself?' And I thought, great idea, but I don't know what to do with myself. And when I walked out of his office I had a mystical event. I don't know what you want to call it exactly, but an unusual event, where the worlds sort of crossed, the seen and unseen, and I was feeling like I wasn't walking on the ground, but walking a few feet above the ground. So the first thing I'm thinking is, what's going on? This is very unusual…then I heard a voice and the voice said,

'Disseminate spiritual wisdom.' And those three words were an answer to what had really been this prayer of the past year or so, which was, since I'm not going to graduate from college, what the heck am I going to do? And, so that's how it happened.

The clarity of this voice was the beginning of a direction for Simon, and it's clear that it still compels her. Although this is a very personal story, I wondered if there was something going on in the culture of Boulder, Colorado in 1985 that prompted Simon's decisions and direction. She emphatically stated that it was purely a personal call.

What happened was after I got that message, then I started thinking about it immediately, I mean I probably was walking above the ground like that for two minutes and then I came back. My feet were on the ground and I was like what do I do?

And the first thing I thought of was how the books of Herman Hesse and Allan Watts had been lifelines for me as a teenager, and how really you could say they kept me alive. And that's strong language and really intense and maybe you could say it's a little exaggerated, but I loved them that much and I felt like they were my best friends; those books were my best friends. And I thought to myself that someone like Herman Hesse, who had all the experiences he had, and he didn't kill himself, he wrote, and then those books lived to help somebody like me. So, then, couldn't I put out ideas like that and the stuff that I would publish and the stuff that I would put out into the world would be lifelines like that to

another generation of people? What a great thing to do! What an inspiring thing to

do! I can do that.

Simon's description of the importance of the writings of Hesse and Watts in her life is a

really good example of meaning-making as mediated. People have been inspired by

writers and orators before them for a very long time, and they continue to be through

evolving methods of communication; a reminder that spirituality has always been

mediated. She continues:

And then I had to think about, well, how am I going to do that, in what

format? I thought about putting out books, but at that point, having dropped out of

Swarthmore, I was actually sick of books and honestly, it takes so long to read a

book! I learned something at college and it was that I learned best listening to

somebody talk. And I don't believe that everybody learns best that way and

probably a lot of people learn best because they read and process that way. But for

me, and maybe this is just because I'm somatically oriented and orally oriented,

when I hear somebody, I get what they're saying in a very deep and immediate

way. It's like there's a quality of voice and cadence, the quality of their speech,

what they care the most about…it's all just distilled and right there for me.

So I thought may be I should do something with lectures and talks. And of

course I had listened to some dharma talks at that point in my life and I loved

listening to dharma talks. It was my favorite thing; for me it was like music to

listen to a really beautiful presentation of a 45-minute dharma talk, and I thought,

I can do that, it makes sense. I didn't really know if there'd be an audience and to

say I didn't care isn't quite right, but I didn't know and it didn't really matter.

This is something I could do. I didn't think, oh this could be huge, this is a

business, this could make a lot of money! I wasn't thinking that way. I was

thinking what can I do so that I can be of service? How could I keep learning and

have a few dollars in my pocket, so that the money I inherited could become more

money instead of just going away? So it was simple like that. There was no

market analysis.

This personal, experientially based knowing is reminiscent of Oprah's major shift in the

mid-1990's. Acknowledging her participation in "trash TV," Oprah decided it was time

to change the game for talk shows, and transitioned her approach to "Change Your Life

TV" (Parkins, 2001, pp. 145–57), with a more positive and life-giving focus. It is also

illustrative of the knowledge of self and personal authority that many SBNR people

claim.

In a 2013 interview with Krista Tippett, Simon talked about the loneliness she

experienced as a child, and her desire to talk with others about her deep spiritual

questions. Simon said in that interview that *Sounds True* was most likely a response to

that (Tippett, 2013). I asked Simon where her determination and confidence for this

project came from. Besides her childhood and young adult experiences, what informed

her knowledge that this was the right choice? She replied:

I was reading a book at the time by Eugene Gendlin called *Focusing*, and

so in the focusing method what you do is focus on this thing called a "felt sense."

You're looking inside for a felt sense of different things. Even back then, even

before I started studying somatic meditation within the lineage in which I've been trained which is the Tibetan tantric lineage. Even back then I was reading a book by a Western psychotherapist called *Focusing*. And so I think that primed me to look for that felt sense; the felt sense of excitement and enthusiasm. So I kind of knew this was right and I knew it based on the way it felt inside of me. And if the culture told me there was no market for this, it didn't matter! That wasn't where I was looking. I was looking inside; I had this sense, all of me lit up, saying 'yes!' I'd been experimenting, and looking at all kinds of different things and praying, and nothing felt right, so when I felt so over the moon…I was like 'O, thank God!'

I commented on how compelling this bodily experience had been for her, and she replied that that's how she still knows "it's not just a legend in my own mind;" she can remember how it felt, and she still feels it today. This led to a conversation about the practice of being present to one's own reality and how many of the resources offered by *Sounds True* tap into this contemporary understanding of presence and awareness.

I do think the thing you can do is attune, help people attune, and point them toward somatic experience, and a lot of people aren't even awake to their somatic experience in the first place, they're just engaged in their thinking, so all their attention is in their thinking, and they're very identified with that in terms of their identity. So their sense of who they are is coming from thought. And I think you can make that shift and ask, 'How are you experiencing that in your body? What does your body like right now? How does your body respond to the word

'hate?' How does it feel? How does your body respond to the words 'you're beautiful?' And then, you teach people practices.

Body based meditation is a big one. I also think that all of the interest we see in yoga, even though many people might be motivated in the beginning by losing weight…. If you do yoga enough and if you have a gifted teacher, soon a quality of embodied awareness starts to emerge. Even just teaching people the Vipassana posture, the lying down at the end of the yoga practice. I think yoga's a great gateway and we know how many people are practicing yoga.

With a good feel for Simon's background and motivation, I asked what she knew about the customer base for *Sounds True*. She explained how difficult that was to pin down because of their distribution model. One-third of the company's revenue comes from customers who buy directly from the website. The other two-thirds comes from vendors who sell their products including Amazon and Barnes and Noble. In terms of customer analytics, Simon said that 65% of their direct-sale customers are female and over the age of 45. I asked if she had a sense that these people were part of or outside of traditional religious communities. Her reply was that their customers are "extremely open-minded." She assumes a large amount of eclecticism as opposed to traditional paths, but is unable to quantify that.

I asked her about how and if there is a sense of community being created through her business. She turned this into a two-part response, saying that different things are happening in the *Sounds True* workplace community and in the consumer community. She spoke of the joys and difficulties of a workplace community, which I include because

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I think it informs the corporate identity as well as the sense of integrity the company embodies.

It's difficult to talk about community when people can lose their jobs. And there are different kinds of reasons why people need to lose their jobs for the company to thrive. And yet you're a community, you've bonded, and you've done these all company events and things to build community and then you have to let people go. And so it's an interesting kind of community.

I think for me, what is important is that there are values in place that are enacted that enable people to relate authentically at work, to relate person to person, human to human, really, not through a bunch of levels or masks, to feel that they can trust the organization. It doesn't mean that they're not going to lose their job, because they might, but that they're going to be told the truth of what's going on. We see this happening; we want to let you know in advance, so we can make a plan together. So you can have a community but I just want to clarify that there's some really tricky aspects to it. It's complex…

Regarding the sense of community on the customer side, Simon reflected on her own philosophy and desire to be authentic in this important area:

There's been a lot of experimentation with community on-line, and sometimes people will write to me and say, "I'm part of the *Sounds True* community," as someone who listens to my podcast or something like that. And I always think that's an interesting use of the word community. I never use it. I would never say 'Dear *Sounds True* Community.' I would never address people

that way. I think it's kind of flimsy; I think it's a flimsy use of the word. I don't

think it *qualifies* in my view as a community.

Now, could *Sounds True* generate more of an on-line community? Maybe.

We haven't done it to date in a way that makes me confident or comfortable using

that word. So I think that just the idea of a community of people who are all

listening to the same on-line course, and now we're a community…I don't know

about that! I think it's a little fishy personally. Maybe we put up a picture of

ourselves and have an interaction…I mean it's this kind of pop-up community

that exists for the 8 week on-line course, where we're all listening to the same

teacher, asking questions, and maybe we get to talk to each other. Does it give

people the sense that they're connecting to other like-minded people with similar

interests? Does that make it a community? I don't know if that makes it a

community! I know people use that word a lot with these on-line things, but I

notice I always feel a little like it's an overstatement about what's happened.

We talked about the likely scenario of small groups, some probably church-based,

who use materials published by *Sounds True*. We agreed that in this case, community had

already been formed, and hopefully the shared learning helped to deepen the connections.

Simon offered another example, which is the production partnership *Sounds True* has

with Eckhart Tolle TV (ETTV):

ETTV has like 11,000 members worldwide. And people say, 'Join the

community! Be part of the ETTV community!' Out of those 11,000 people maybe

10% of them actually participate in the community pages which enable people to

write in and share about their favorite video clips and talk with each other, so only 10% of the purchasers of the media participate, and then what's the actual value for those 10% of the people who are communicating with each other?

We have surveyed people on the ETTV site, and we ask them 'What do you find valuable about the subscription service?' Interestingly, the community functionality is at the bottom of the list; it's not one of the things that they find most valuable. What they find most valuable are the monthly teachings from Eckhart, the live meditation that Eckhart does once a month. Now everyone can tune in together live, when Eckhart is broadcasting, and they like that. Do they feel like they're part of a community? Maybe they do! Maybe people do, okay. But when we ask them about the community functionality of the website, it gets a pretty low rating.

Our conversation turned to the understanding and granting of authority. I asked Simon about her sense whether the teachers she publishes are viewed as spiritual authorities, and she asked for clarification on the term. I replied that in traditional religious settings, one would look to a priest, or minister or rabbi as an authority figure. I also shared findings from Mercadante's, Clark's and Ammerman's research showing a contemporary cultural turn to inner authority in spiritual and religious matters. I wondered if the materials *Sounds True* publishes help an individual to build and grow that inner authority, or if instead they wanted to find a wise person and just believe what that person taught.

This is also a very complicated area. Before I answer, I just want to say this before I forget. There's a teacher that's very beloved both at *Sounds True* and among our audience. His name is Adya Shanti and people look to him like an Eckhart Tolle, as somebody who has realized a great deal of the freedom of being, just to use that phrase. He's written a book called *The Way of Liberation*, and one of the things he says is 'Never give all of your authority to a teacher.' Never give all of your authority to someone else. So that's an interesting middle position if you will, and I think that's a position that perhaps a lot of our customers are coming to. They may say, I can learn from Eckhart Tolle, Keating, Almas, Thich Nat Hahn, Pema Chodron, and on and on. And obviously, these people are great, great teachers. People who have realized far more than I have, they're way beyond me on the path, but I'm not going to give them ALL the authority. The situation is not that these teachers are the experts OR I'm going to follow my own thing all the way; those would be two extremes.

But that there's something *else* going on here, which is, I'm going to really learn and listen to these experts, these people who are further along, but at the end of the day I have to trust my own calling, my own heart, what's right for me, and so that would be one way. At the same time, I think there are other people who, say, I listened to a program and I joined that teacher's training and study and decided it's great. An example might be, a customer who did some shopping at *Sounds True*, listened to twenty different people, and when they heard Fr. Thomas Keating, knew they had to go to Snowmass Monastery and do a retreat. Perhaps

then they decided to become a serious student and undertake a 5-year training. So I think there are many people, who when they hear somebody and it really resonates, then they go deeper into that. How do they view the authority issue? I don't know. I'm sure it would be very interesting to talk with him or her; each person might have a different, nuanced view of how much authority are they giving to the teacher and how much they are keeping for themselves.

We reflected on whether the search would be for authority or for wisdom, and that the two might not necessarily be connected. Simon provided an example of what this might look like:

I think people say, I need a teacher. So if I wanted to play the piano, wouldn't I get a piano teacher? I'm using the example of a piano teacher, so it's taking it out of divine authority, and putting it into a more everyday context. I need a piano teacher, great! If that person started acting like a jerk then I wouldn't hang around. But I'm going to learn as much as I can. And if I learn as much as I can from that person and they're no longer teaching me new things, then I'm going to find a different kind of teacher. And, I think there's a lot of confusion. I don't want to make it sound like it's not confusing. It's *really* confusing.

Some teachers ask for a certain type of loyalty or commitment and a lot of people will bounce off of that. And sometimes that teacher will say, 'Oh, those are your unresolved autonomy issues or you're not willing to make the sacrifice that's really necessary for the path.' Is that person right? Or are they on a power trip, trying to collect students? And how do you discern the difference? And

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again, I think if people have this grounding in their own soma knowing, that's the

only way to navigate because you have to be able to use your own discriminating

power. You have to ask yourself, 'How does this feel? Is this right for me?'

What Simon is describing is inner authority in action, and it implies a level of

commitment and effort that goes far beyond placing one's beliefs and hopes in a

traditional religious authority figure as part of a religion inherited from one's parents and

never personally confronted or processed. On the other hand, are people being challenged

to stretch their thinking and their actions, or are they simply acting as consumers,

choosing what they like and what supports and affirms their current spiritual and

religious assumptions (Mahan, 2014, location 878)? I'm sure the reality is varied,

however, it is interesting to think about this.

I wondered about Simon's vetting process for the authors she publishes, and

asked if there are teachers she has refused to publish.

Yes. And we're not always right, meaning there can be a difficult gray

area. If we wait for every teacher we publish to be a saint, we'll have a really

small company. But there's also a level of egregiousness that's unacceptable, and

that's pretty clear too.

I asked if there are teachers they've published that the company no longer

supports, and she referred to a couple of recent examples that went public and were

particularly difficult to deal with. In the process of working with these individuals,

abusive treatment and sexual promiscuity with students were revealed, so *Sounds True*

cancelled the contracts of these teachers, and Simon had to make public statements about

the situations. It was uncomfortable, but necessary to maintain the integrity of their company and their commitment to consumers.

Curious about other ways Simon understands what she does, I asked if there are metaphors she uses to describe her work:

Good question…well, at one point my partner described what *Sounds True* is doing as releasing butterflies out into the world and that when people encounter it, they have a moment of experiencing a miracle; and also of course it's a symbol of transformation and of coming out of the cocoon. What I like about it is, I have this idea that if people hear something, it could be just one small idea that they hear on one program, or one small thing that they read, that it could actually change them; it could become a touch point.

For example, if they could just hear the idea of enlightenment, and someone describes it in a way that's meaningful for them. Or the very first time you hear a word like kenosis and somebody describes what it means, then it's like a seed gets planted and it becomes a kind of homing instinct inside the person. Something's been lit up, and their life can actually change direction from that. So that's part of my conviction that by putting out all of this material we're creating all these access points. I like the butterfly analogy for that.

This response reminded me of Simon's original vision of touching peoples' lives the way that Hesse and Watts had touched hers. She followed this with another metaphor:

I like to cook…sometimes I'll joke, my partner and I will joke, that if I'm having a lot of stress at work, I should just open a restaurant, like that would be

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less work. Just cook for people. It's honest, you know, just honest living. It's not

like these spiritual things; just cook a meal! And sometimes I do feel like we're

serving food that's a type of spiritual nourishment. But I believe we're feeding

people in way that's the most essential way.

I definitely have thought of the metaphor of *Sounds True* as the hugest

buffet. And you know that people can say that in a negative way, like it's a

smorgasbord. But I grew up in Miami, and went to these brunch buffets with my

parents at these big hotels. And they have twelve different feeding stations. And I

remember as a kid being overwhelmed, really with happy gluttony at the situation.

I thought, 'This is great; I can sit here and eat all day!' I do think that *Sounds True*

provides something like that in terms of all the different offerings. You know

some people might just hang out at the cheese station, and that's okay, that's

absolutely okay. They've found what they wanted, they can go back as many

times as they want, and others prefer a variety.

I have also thought of the myriad of digital spiritual offerings as a smorgasbord, and not

in a positive way. Simon's explanation helps me see this as opportunity and potential as

well.

I was curious whether and how three decades in this business has changed

Simon's understandings of spirituality. Her response was enthusiastic.

Oh my God! I just came back from spending three days with a teacher

called A.H. Almas, I don't know if you've ever heard of him…but the program

we did was called 'Endless Enlightenment; the View of Totality in the Diamond

Approach.' So the diamond approach is the method that he's been teaching for the last thirty some odd years. And the idea behind endless enlightenment is that there *is* no final destination and that there are actually an endless number of realizations of different kinds, quite profound and different from one another that can occur, and that there will be new realizations, new kinds of enlightenment. It's a big, vast spiritual universe, and once you discover one light of insight or knowing, don't rest there. Don't think that's it. Be disidentified enough from any breakthrough that you're open to another breakthrough happening, then another breakthrough, then another and that you see things from yet another perspective.

So at the moment at least, I feel like the spiritual journey is endless, my understanding keeps deepening, and evolving all the time and I wouldn't want to claim any place as a place of final knowing of any kind.

This view of "knowing" is interesting to compare to that of historical Christian spiritualities. Despite the fact that there have been claims of absolute answers and final knowing, there has always been an acknowledgement of mystery, whole contemplative traditions of unknowing and belief in evolving learning. Contemporary Christian theology, in many of its iterations, tends toward humility about final knowing, which resonates with Almas. In closing, I asked Simon about SBNR seekers and how she views the role of her company in relationship to them.

We're in this time when the traditions are being asked to evolve and where these people who are finding themselves outside of a tradition are experiencing a wilderness and it's confusing. I sometimes worry if *Sounds True* is contributing

to the confusion, and ask what can I do to turn this around? How can I help people sort through so they don't just become 'a little bit of this, a little bit of that,' and they don't even know what's going on any more? They've taken things, but they aren't actually giving any of the real investment that it takes, the training you would receive on a traditional path. How do we address that? What is *Sounds True's* responsibility in that?

It was heartening to hear about Simon's concern about the lack of investment of some spiritual seekers and the importance of discipline that a traditional path provides. I also appreciated her realization that her company has a responsibility and a role in this changing reality. Simon offered some examples of ways she is trying to address this:

What makes me feel good is that I host a podcast series where I interview spiritual teachers, where we're having these kinds of discussions. I just did a 35-part series called 'Waking up: What does it really mean?' Because I saw how this term 'awakening,' like the term spirituality, was being used by people and they all meant different things. We're all talking about waking up, but what do *you* mean by waking up? What are you talking about? What was your experience? So, what I want to do is move these conversations forward, and just doing that 35-part series was really illuminating for me. We gave away the program for free for 30 days as part of the celebration of our 30th year anniversary. So the idea is to have a lot of free opportunities to bring forth dialogues in this area of the spiritual but not religious.

I think it is really important because we need to help each other sort this

out, and not just let people think they have to figure it out on their own. And there

will be more and more commercialism and there's nothing we can do about that.

But I do think having some places to bring forward some of these questions and

help people sort it out is something we can do. Let's help each other.

I left this interview feeling positive about the possibilities for the engagement of

spirituality and digital media, and realized anew how important personal and corporate

integrity are to this project. As discussed earlier, religion and spirituality have always

been mediated; "we have no experience of the divine that is not embedded in the human

mediations of that experience" (Mahan, 2014, location 1848). The question is not

whether or not this happens, but rather how it can best happen. The three examples we

have looked at here illustrate the process of media and religion shaping each other and

creating new ways of being spiritual and religious. These hold the potential for increasing

the relevance of spiritual awareness and development and perhaps new ways of living

and positively contributing to the world.

We have seen how post-secular understandings of religious and spiritual

community and authority are played out in these examples of digital media organizations

and offerings. It is clear that the locus of authority resides in the individual, and that

experiences of community are quite different from traditional religious practice. In the

next chapter, we hear from the study respondents themselves about their beliefs and

practices in these two areas.

Chapter Five: Points of Contention: Spiritual Authority and Community

We have explored understandings of authority and community as expressed by theologian Karl Rahner, as an example of one strand of traditional Christian spirituality. We have also gained insight into authority and community as understood by purveyors of some types of contemporary spiritual resources, especially those expressed through the personal motivation and experience of founder Tami Simon and the *Sounds True* multimedia publishing company. Now we turn to recent qualitative studies of the spiritual but not religious population. Studies on the SBNR population continue to be conducted[17], and new revelations and deeper understandings will certainly be discovered. The studies I am using, however, are some of the few available that provide a contemporary look at the beliefs and values of SBNR people without the burden of pre-conceived categories for what is or is not religious or spiritual; a reason I find them valuable and credible, if not exhaustive. Although they explore a variety of perspectives on interesting areas of contemporary spiritual understanding and practice, I will be drawing specifically on study responses having to do with spiritual and religious authority and community. These responses will enable a thematic analysis of these categories as understood and practiced by the respondents, and give an actual voice to the ways people are living out their beliefs and addressing their spiritual needs.

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[17] See (Drescher, 2016) for example.

The Studies

In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes; Finding Religion in Everyday Life,* sociologist of religion Nancy Tatom Ammerman worked with 95 women and men from a diverse group including Jews, Catholics, Protestants (African-American, conservative and liberal Whites), neo-pagans, Mormons and religiously unaffiliated. She identifies the limitations of her sample, which includes only English-speakers, and a lack of representation from rural areas and non-Judeo-Christian traditions. Ammerman names as an "unintended benefit" the fact that most respondents were fairly well off and well educated. This is beneficial, she says, because these are the very people one might expect to have moved beyond referring to the spiritual in their lives and experience, due to their education and participation in contemporary public discourse (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 12).

The stories of the everyday religious lives of her respondents were obtained in a variety of ways, including interviews, oral diaries and the invitation to share photographs of what they saw as sacred. Many respondents included events and places that fall outside of traditional notions of what has been considered sacred, including work, exercise, caring for pets, and other ordinary activities. Her findings demonstrate that contemporary people are having experiences they identify as spiritual outside of institutional religious boundaries. It has always been true that reflective people find meaning in the events and people in their lives, however, many of her respondents are experiencing spirituality only or mostly in contexts other than structured religious settings, and this is what is distinctive. Ammerman collected demographic data, and the "basic contours" of her respondents' lives, including religious upbringing, personal faith identity, changes and

decisions, friends, practices, religious involvement, beliefs and values, work and leisure. Additionally, participants were given a disposable camera with instructions to take pictures of 5-6 important places in their lives. They were also asked to record a short daily story, as well as to follow prompts for stories about recent and current situations in their lives. The pictures and oral diary responses were discussed with a series of follow up questions. This methodology allowed respondents to be in charge of and to share their own definitions and understandings of spirituality and what they considered to be sacred. The inclusion of images and daily oral diary entries enriched and expanded the personal interviews, providing a more in-depth view of respondents' lives.

In *Belief Without Borders; Inside the Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious,* theologian Linda Mercadante conducted interviews with over 100 people who self-identify as spiritual but not religious about their ideas and beliefs regarding divinity, human nature, life after death, and community. She also spent time observing and interacting with people in yoga classes and retreat centers, by participating in alternative health modalities and attending seminars and talks offered on the topic of spirituality. Her own teaching, including classes on writing spiritual memoirs, connected her with more people, both directly and indirectly as others heard about her project and shared it with their friends (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 264–265). Her interview process included hearing about the respondent's spiritual journeys, and learning about their history of religious affiliation. She focused on people in the Mid-west and West, conducting two focus groups and interviewing 90 people.

Like Ammerman, Mercadante had more response from women and well-educated people, demographics she claims are used to being self-reflective. Categorizing by age cohort (The Greatest Generation, The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials) provided a window into generational interest in identifying as SBNR. The largest numbers of her respondents (40%) were Baby Boomers, with the majority being white, middle-class, and college-educated women. She further organized her respondents into "types," including Dissenters, Casuals, Explorers, Seekers, and Immigrants.

Drawing on her own experience as a one-time atheist and seeker, Mercadante entered this endeavor with the assumption that something vibrant and new was going on, and the conviction that it has significance for individuals and the culture as a whole. She also calls on religious traditions to pay attention to this phenomenon and to provide formation for ministers and others about how to work with this growing population. Her willingness to embrace this movement, with a critical eye, provides an alternative voice from those who tend to be dismissive of new spiritual realities and their practitioners.

Lynn Schofield Clark, in *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural, 2003*), explores the connection between spirituality, religion and the supernatural through interviews with teenagers and their families about the media entertainment they are viewing, and its meanings for them. Clark's study evolved into a combination of three stages of ethnographic and a final stage of critical/cultural history research. Although her research questions are focused on the prevalence of the supernatural in contemporary entertainment media, she is also interested in how these themes in teen culture inform religious identity narratives. She interviewed 100 people,

including teens and parents, with the gender of the teens evenly divided. The racial/ethnic mix included a majority of Anglo respondents, with the remaining including African American, Mexican American, and Biracial. Religious affiliation included a majority of Protestants, followed by Nondenominational/Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist, Jewish and others. Thirty-four of her participants identified as None/Nonpracticing. Clark identifies five "types" of respondents, classified by their understanding of and engagement with religion and the supernatural. Acknowledging that these categories are fluid and not definitive, she names them as Resisters, Mysticals, Experimenters, Traditionalists, and the Intrigued. Her work suggests that interest in the supernatural grows as traditional religious affiliation is left behind, especially for young people who may define their own spirituality in supernatural terms adopted from popular media characters and story lines.

In the referenced studies, two major themes emerged around religious and spiritual authority. These include a shift from the understanding of a religious tradition and/or a person (minister, priest, pope, etc.) as the source and holder of authority, to identifying one's inner self and personal experience as a valid and final authority. The category of community turned out to be a bit more complex. I've organized the discussion of these religious community responses into four main themes: benefits and problems, commitment and fluidity, non-religious options and the ideal community. We begin with religious and spiritual authority.

Religious and Spiritual Authority

In this section, we look at contemporary post-secular understandings of religious and spiritual authority among the SBNR, and begin with an attempt at definition. We cannot assume a singular understanding, as evidenced by Tami Simon's response to the question of authority in the previous chapter. What does authority actually mean to the study respondents?

For some of Mercadante's interviewees, authority was related to personal rights. People have the right to choose what they will believe in (as opposed to giving that right away to someone else); what criteria they will use for self-judgment and what spiritual practices are most meaningful for them (Mercadante, 2014, p. 34). In fact, there was righteous anger expressed by many towards church leadership that practiced "dogmatism, judgmentalism and exclusivism" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 180) in deciding who was in and who was out. For others, authority means finding your own truth as opposed to "*the* truth" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 170). An uncritical acceptance of everything taught is seen as inauthentic; one has to own truth and not simply believe what someone else dictates. It was also expressed that authority derives from doing the right thing, just because it's the right thing to do, not because someone else or a religious organization tells you to (Mercadante, 2014, p. 187). Mercadante notes that some of the older respondents believed that reality itself had inherent values and norms, and that these could be understood as a source of authority (Mercadante, 2014, p. 237). While authority was understood in a variety of ways, respondents in the studies were uniformly adamant in their opposition to it being imposed on them.

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Locus of Authority: From External to Internal

Is a transcendent authority or someone or something external to the self necessary for moral decision-making and meaningful living? Must the self, as Adam Seligman asserts, "define itself in relation to something authoritative if it is to exist as something beyond a bundle of desires" (Seligman, 2000, p. 292)? Seligman takes it further, saying that authority and community are intimately intertwined, and that individual authority is not authentic or even possible outside of the context of some form of community (Seligman, 2003, p. 47). In Catholicism, for example, religious authority is understood in a very specific way. The three authoritative foundations are Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium (or the teaching authority of the Church). From the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, promulgated after Vatican II in 1965, we are told:

> But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, "handing over" to them "the authority to teach in their own place." This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face. (see 1 John 3:2)

> It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (Abbott, 1966, pp. 114–118)

For most Christian denominations, authority lies in some combination of these elements, with shifting emphases from tradition to tradition. Understandings of religious authority have changed; however, this does not necessarily mean people no longer have religious or spiritual beliefs, they simply do not rely on a religious leader or tradition to serve as an

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arbiter for or mediator of a divine being. Rather, they engage in a de-traditionalizing process, which "involves a shift of authority from 'without' to 'within' whereby individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority and 'voice' is displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self" (Heelas, 1996a, p. 2). Many factors have contributed to this process including the relationship between science and religion, an evolving emphasis on personal autonomy and the changing importance and relevance of the institutional church for many people, as discussed in Chapter Two.

This phenomenon, where one experiences God by being attuned to the experiences of one's own self, has been described in different ways; one way it can be named is "self-spirituality." This can be a complex process, and it entails undertaking spiritual practices and gaining psychological knowledge of one's self, which we have seen reflected in the offerings of *Sounds True* and other spirituality focused digital publishing companies. Heelas calls this process of learning the "sacralization" of the self, which he says gives people confidence and belief in their own spiritual authority (Heelas, 1996b, pp. 18–28).

How does the notion of inner authority play out in the lives of the study respondents? For many of the younger respondents, it was their parents, Baby Boomers, who formed them in this worldview. Because they questioned authority, especially in a secular sense, they taught their children to be critical thinkers and to make decisions for themselves (Mercadante, 2014, p. 47).

In her study with teenagers, Lynn Schofield Clark found that they too had little interest or faith in the authoritative sources of their grandparents or even their parents. Teens are also crafting their own spirituality identities, deciding for themselves what

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actually constitutes spirituality. Often, these understandings of spirituality may seem

unusual to more traditional religious practitioners, such as belief in aliens, witchcraft,

angels, and other interactions with the supernatural (Clark, 2003). Clark also highlights

how these engagements, whether through practices such as séances, watching shows like

Buffy the Vampire Slayer or reading Harry Potter, can lead to comfort in a frightening

world, provide a model for facing life's problems and even promote social responsibility

(Clark, 2003, location 1408). Problems and issues arising from "the human condition"

including illness, loss, relationships and family difficulties, are elements of the spiritual

quest for both youth and adults. These are, of course, questions traditionally addressed by

religious organizations and representatives, but many of those interviewed had no interest

in what religion had to offer or in how any religious tradition might characterize or

approach the issue. Instead, for many, the resolution of their difficulties was measured by

their sense of "well-being, comfort or happiness,"[18] which can best be determined by

looking inward. The basic problems inherent in being human have not changed all that

much, but the search for answers and meaning making has taken a new direction.

How does one come to rely on this "inner voice?" Are there practices necessary for

its development, or is it innate? For some respondents, denying an authority outside of

the self also led to the doubting of one's inner authority, and to the conclusion that there

are no answers, only the quest itself (Mercadante, 2014, p. 80-81). For others, however,

including a respondent named Jennifer, there is no alternative but the self to rely on for

spiritual authority. She says, "I think my intuition is the Divine…and I just follow that"

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[18] Also identified by (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 128–129).

(Mercadante, 2014, p. 84). Another respondent, Kimberly, acknowledged that "they all (religions) have their own sort of right," but this does not grant them authority (Mercadante, 2014, p. 84). Many of Mercadante's respondents did not want to make sweeping statements about what was right or wrong, but insisted that this is for each individual to decide (Mercadante, 2014, p. 129). These comments illustrate the trajectory away from reliance on exterior authority and toward personal decision-making. Non-affiliated respondents in Ammerman's study affirmed this move. The consensus of many of her interviewees is that interior authority is more authentic than exterior authority. How does one access this inner wisdom? According to these studies, it is mediated and determined through one's personal experience, as opposed to something learned.

Personal Experience as Authoritative

The second theme that emerged around the issue of authority in these studies has to do with the importance of personal experience. In Schofield-Clark's interviews with teenagers, she divided her respondents into categories, one of which was the Experimenters. For this group especially, (described as appreciating both religion and the supernatural), their emotions in relation to supernatural or transcendent experiences were key. "What made it 'real' for these teens was not that it was connected to a particular tradition but that it *felt* real…they knew something had happened because they felt it" (Clark, 2003, location 3091). Her categories (which also include Resisters, Mysticals, Traditionalists and the Intrigued) are organized by how respondents understand the relationship between organized religion and the supernatural, and personal experience was an important authoritative source for most of them. Felt experience has always been

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associated with the practice of religion and spirituality; in fact it is often the driving force motivating the desire to participate in song, prayer and ritual. What makes it different now is the way one's experience has become a source of authority, belief and even divinity for many, outside of the context and validation of a religious tradition.[19]

The field of neuroscience is exploring experience as authoritative outside of theistic contexts, studying the spirituality of awe for example, described as being tied to one's feelings (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 35). Neuroscientist Michael Graziano studies the brainwaves of people listening to beautiful music, finding similarities between the feelings of awe inspired by music and those experienced by people in prayer (Graziano, 2011). The affective experiences are powerful and provide their own convincing sense of reality and authenticity, leading to trust in one's own experience, reinforcing a kind of authority.

An important part of the de-traditioning process described by Heelas consists of the adoption of contemporary spiritual practices including mind/body and meditation experiences. These new (to many Americans) practices provide a way to achieve altered states and realize enhanced wellbeing, experiences that used to happen in the contexts and spaces of traditional religions and churches. For many of today's spiritual seekers, however, the dogmas and teachings of the church are actually an impediment to spiritual experience. Respondent Angela, a Baby Boomer who had been Catholic as a child complained about the church, "You can't have your own direct experience with God. You need to get it through the priest" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 182). Despite the fact that

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[19] We recall Tami Simon's reliance on "felt sense" described in the previous chapter.

this is a false understanding, it is Angela's understanding and impetus for her turn to the authority of her own personal experience.

A common thread throughout all three studies is ignorance about traditions and their teachings, even by people who were raised in the traditions they critique. And for those outside of traditions, the lack of religious literacy is of course even more prevalent. Many of Mercadante's respondents stated their belief in perennialism, the idea that all religions teach the same thing. If they each claim to be the one true path, how can any of them be? Respondent Darlene said, "Religion has screwed up God, but that's not God's fault" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 186). Respondent Scotty who self-identifies as a Buddhist Christian said, "Any things that sound true are part of my path and I find that, at the core level of spirituality, all traditions seem to be the same. Only the gateways are different" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 187). This belief was echoed by many, as was the conviction that by remaining outside of traditional structures, seekers were better able to comprehend the most important "truths." Respondent Anne said about traditional religious believers, "People have gotten away from their own truth through their own personal experience" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 187). Again, an emphasis on the validity of one's own experience over any outside authority, as well as forces outside the self who might impede the search for truth.

Another element of perennialism, in addition to the belief that all religions teach the same thing, is the mystical element. What is it that people are seeking through religion, spirituality or secular practices like CrossFit or yoga? Important to many is the sense of transcendence, the loss of one's own boundaries and a connection to something or

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someone larger than one's self. If there are many ways to achieve this experience, why commit to just one path, when each path has its own shortcomings? Perhaps it is even more authentic not to choose (Mercadante, 2014, p. 188).

While the transition from religion as a publicly influential source of authority to a more personally practiced spirituality may be empowering and meaningful for many, it can also lead to isolation and to an unrealistic and negative view of religious community, serving to further weaken the efficacy of religious communities. We now turn to understandings and expectations of communities as voiced by study participants.

Religious Community

The subject of community as portrayed in these studies seems to be more multi-faceted than the subject of authority. Responses were about the benefits and problems of communities, the longing for community from those who have lost it, a lack of understanding about why anyone would want it, the joys and difficulties of commitment, the implications for serving the wider world, and what an ideal community would look like.

Definitions and Changing Understandings of Community

A sense of belonging, shared rituals around important life events, guidance for life's difficulties and a supportive group to surround you during both difficult and happy times. This sounds like a powerful and positive environment; why do so many of the study respondents see religious community in a negative light? According to Mercadante, community is "based on common beliefs and values, responsibility for one another, shared and enduring emotional bonds, and a loyalty to the larger whole rather than to just

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the self" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 156). Keith Ward adds the engagement with the transcendent to his definition of a specifically religious community. "There should be a particular society which protects and sustains their basic values and beliefs, within which one may pursue the ideal human goal, as defined within the society" (Ward, 2000, p. 1). While affirming the benefits inherent in people coming together, some of the SBNR respondents in Mercadante's study said "we're already connected, we just don't realize it" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 154). The implication is, there is no need to be intentional about coming together with all of the headaches that implies, we can just rest in the knowledge of our already existing connectedness.

For many study respondents, there is just too much baggage associated with community. As evangelical Christian leaders entered the realm of conservative politics in the 1990s and gained a more prominent voice, Christianity itself became conflated with oppressive conservatism and authoritative practices and beliefs. This was problematic for many people who appreciated the benefits of community but did not want to be affiliated with this brand of Christianity. After all, community is perpetuated and nourished by members who share a mission and care for each other, and if the mission is appropriated for political purposes, there is no longer a commonality to come together around. There are, of course, other societal and cultural factors at play as we have discussed, however, the turn of evangelical conservatism to politics represented a significant moment in the process of people becoming less connected to religious communities and public perception of credibility. This does not mean that everyone who remains in a religious community is fully participating or even attending on a regular basis. There are many

ways to be part of a community, however, the understandings of what constitutes a community, belonging and membership are evolving. We now look more deeply at the benefits of religious community.

Benefits of Religious Community

Religious communities have traditionally played an important role in forming people for volunteer service to the larger community, and in providing them with structured opportunities to do so. Additionally, research shows that those who actively participate in religious communities show a tendency to incorporate spirituality into many elements of their lives, allowing "mundane concerns to mix freely with spiritual realities" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 19). The stories of everyday events in peoples' lives, when shared, are models and examples of the ways spiritual and religious values and beliefs inform the rest of life. Also identified as beneficial is the community response to illness and other life difficulties. The support of a religious community can be transformative, and is sometimes the only resource people have during these times. Perhaps there is a "romantic notion" (Clark, 2003, location 1185) at work here about the power and necessity of community, but the reality of positive religious community has been experienced by many. "Many of the values we still live by in this society are the fruits of the faith traditions and communal efforts of previous generations" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 238), and the social capital generated through religious community charity, outreach and education efforts has positively impacted society and the individuals involved (Mercadante, 2014, p. 156).

For some, community becomes stronger and more united when members' beliefs are challenged. The community itself becomes a place of protection and support against threats ranging from misunderstanding to harassment (Clark, 2003, location 2901). Clark shares the story of a Wiccan family she interviewed, who were very well-connected with the larger religious and secular populations in their small town, but still encountered challenges to their beliefs and practices from some individuals. The ability to connect with other Wiccans through the Internet for conversation, support and organizing gatherings was vital to their well-being. This connection with others on a spiritual level, whether on-line or in person, provides the opportunity for discourse and reflection on one's inner life, which is not often found elsewhere. Ammerman's study revealed that even those whom she identifies as "spiritually typical people," i.e., middle of the road in terms of spiritual engagement, are positively impacted by community participation. She notes that "participation…shapes spirituality" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 111), and that emotionally-positive stories are told by attendees about their experience of community.

Also important are the practical ways community members often support each other. Respondent Margi shared the story of her community's response to her husband's surgery:

> I could have had meals for a month! I mean the outpouring of—'what do you need? I'll take care of this. I'll do this.' You can't—it's an unbelievable blessing to know that you have that kind of backup and that kind of support from people. (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 107)

Another important element of community is revealed in the friendships and happy times members share with each other, including meals, trips and smaller faith sharing groups

that enable participants to connect deeply, have fun together and talk about their spiritual lives with each other. Community is built and deepened over time in ways material, social and spiritual (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 109). Of course, no religious community is perfect, and so we turn to some problems inherent in human and especially spiritual groupings.

Problems With Religious Community

Although a "decided wistfulness" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 158) about the loss of community was detected, especially among middle class interviewees, the majority of Mercadante's respondents reported negative connotations. It's not just younger people for whom rituals and communities were no longer perceived of as necessary or meaningful. Members of "The Silent Generation" (born 1925-1945), many of whom had been raised and formed in these traditions and who admitted the importance they had once held, are no longer affiliated, for a variety of reasons (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 37–38). Younger interviewees who had not been raised in a religious tradition found it difficult to understand the benefits of something they had never experienced (Mercadante, 2014, p. 85).

Some respondents had experienced problems in community; for others their reasons for not belonging were ethical, intellectual or conceptual. The lack of trust in human institutions played a role here, as it did in the area of authority. Mary, from the Silent Generation, responded: "When I think of going to a community, I think of them making demands on me and my work and my family and my marriage life. It's life-draining. I haven't found a community that nourishes" (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 163–164).

Baby Boomer Beverly said, "I get weird about organizations. They collect money. And they want you to be on committees…They all sit there and fight" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 164). It turns out that Beverly has had little experience with actually being a member of a church, but these were her perceptions.

Other respondents believed that religious and spiritual communities were uniquely prone to problems such as manipulation and oppression, and that was reason enough to avoid them. Gen Xer Jennifer didn't want to limit herself by joining a religious community. "I don't want to belong to any one thing [be]cause I feel like I'll put myself in a box" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 165). Respondent Brendan says, "I am my own church. I am my own congregation…I personally don't feel like I need help. I know God is there. If I need to talk to him, I can" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 165). Many of the negative perceptions of community are related to the divide between "spiritual" and "religious." For the majority of SBNR interviewees, spirituality implies an individual journey, while religion comes with the baggage and burden of community and authority.

Other problems highlighted by study respondents included the motivations of religious communities themselves, as well as the inherent challenges of humans coming together for a common purpose, religious or otherwise. Some of these include a hierarchical structure, an insider/outsider mentality, or prioritizing the needs of the organization over those of its members (Mercadante, 2014, p. 157). The contemporary focus on personal spirituality over the welfare of a community stands in stark contrast to earlier cultural understandings and practices of allegiance to a group taking precedence over the individual (Mercadante, 2014, p. 157). There was an expectation of potential

individual compromise, and a willingness, which was considered reasonable in light of the benefits afforded by belonging to a community.

Expectations, especially for religious and spiritual communities, are high. When the inevitable failings occur, people are discouraged and many don't come back. Shirley, one of Ammerman's respondents tells the story of what happened when her husband died:

> And so this church that I've belonged to for four years…four thousand members. I am—I came in at the cusp of losing [my husband]. No support really. And I don't mean to sound sour grapes. It's just an observation on their priorities. And so there were really no phone calls around that, no reaching out, no 'How are you doing?' no 'Gee, we're starting a support group; would you like to come?' (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 120)

Shirley continues the story by sharing that it wasn't until she stopped contributing financially that she began to hear from the church, in the form of multiple letters and phone calls. "I have not been back or given any more, and it's not an angry decision; it's just that's not really where I want to spend my time" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 120). Mercadante highlights the importance of distinguishing between "the community that abused and the community that disappointed" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 170), however, she notes that she encountered far fewer stories of abuse than she had anticipated.

For the "spiritually disengaged" in Ammerman's study, a crisis in belief was responsible for their disaffiliation from religious communities as opposed to a disappointing or abusive situation (Ammerman, 2013a, pp. 121–125). Clearly, religious communities have their strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes it's the luck of the draw. In my own ministry I've heard from people who had a single negative experience

and walked away from the church forever. Or, they went to talk to a priest or minister about an important situation in their lives and were met with coldness or given disappointing responses that led to their disaffiliation. Some people try again, while many others leave for good.

Commitment to Religious Community

What factors contribute to one's commitment to a religious community? The contemporary unwillingness of many to submit to an external authority is certainly integral to this reality (Mercadante, 2014, p. 179). For other respondents, what's offered is just not enough. Respondent Ron said of his church community, "The thing that I didn't have was an 'ah-ha' moment and…I blame that on the church" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 177). Common among the complaints voiced was a lack of spirituality, of an experience of faith. Some expressed the wish that they could just fit in like others in their community, but they couldn't. Many respondents experienced friendship, support and connection, but the elusive "spiritual experience" was missing for them (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 177–179). This is helpful in understanding the contemporary distinction between religion and spirituality. Owen C. Thomas links this to the "Romantic" movement, characterizing it as:

> An emphasis on the interior life as distinct from the outer life of the body, the community, and history; a focus on individual and private life rather than public life; an emphasis on feeling rather than rationality; and…a sharp distinction between religion which is disparaged and spirituality which is honored. (Thomas, 2006, pp. 397–415)

The highly sought after spiritual experience can be more difficult to achieve and maintain in religious community because of the added responsibility of thinking of and considering

the needs of others. On the other hand, many peoples' experiences of spirituality are enhanced in a healthy and supportive community setting.

Respondents in these studies want to keep their options open when it comes to spirituality, and don't believe one religious tradition can or even should meet all of their needs (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 84–85). Interestingly, only one of Mercadante's respondents, Susan, reflected on whether her inability to commit was problematic (Mercadante, 2014, p. 165). This was not a concern for her other interviewees. It was viewed as laudable to continue the experimentation and exploration process according to many study respondents. The fluid nature of belonging, whether to a short-term on-line class, temporary membership in a church community or a yoga studio reflect in these respondents a "revolving door" philosophy (Mercadante, 2014, p. 164).

Non-Religious Communities and Social Outreach

The quest for intensified feelings and deep connection with something larger than one's self, sometimes characterized as spiritual experiences, plays out in a variety of places today including exercise programs such as CrossFit "boxes" or gyms, addiction recovery gatherings, and service to the larger community. Are these the spiritual tribes Ammerman is describing, which she defines as audiences, circles, relationships, and places where personal, spiritual stories are told and co-created (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 10)? Many of the study respondents would answer affirmatively. According to one member, "CrossFit is family, laughter, love and community. I can't imagine my life without the people I've met through it" (Oppenheimer, 2015). Ali Huberlie's daily two-hour, early morning workout is an important ritual. Harvard student Casper ter Kuile

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hosted a recent event with the co-founder of CrossFit, Greg Glassman, called "CrossFit as Church?!" Ter Kuile commented:

> What really struck us was the way in which people were bringing their kids to their box…or the way different workouts of the day were named after soldiers who had died in battle. So there's all of these things you would expect to see in a church— remembering the dead through some sort of ritual and intergenerational community. (Oppenheimer, 2015)

Addiction recovery groups are often characterized as spiritual communities. Although some participants criticize the Christian roots, one-third of Mercadante's respondents had participated in some type of 12-step addiction recovery group. Many experienced "spirituality" in this process and appreciated learning about and reflecting on the interior life in ways they hadn't done before. Commonalities between the ethos of the SBNR movement and addiction recovery groups, including the "'Take what you like and leave the rest' aspect of AA" are clear (Mercadante, 2014, p. 174). These similarities serve to both draw SBNRs to these groups and serve as a replacement for religious community for many. Some of her respondents first learned prayer and other spiritual practices in these settings, and had the opportunity to seriously reflect on what their understanding of a "higher power" was. For respondent Brendan, AA helped him realize that he was not alone in questioning his faith. Hearing the stories of others helped him to leave his faith tradition and solidified his beliefs (Mercadante, 2014, p. 175).

For many respondents in Ammerman's study, there was agreement that true spirituality was seen in outreach and compassion for others. Ammerman originally referred to these people as "Golden Rule Christians" (Ammerman, 1997). For both the religious and nonreligious respondents in this study who share this common assertion,

she names it "ethical spirituality" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 44). Respondent Eric who is

loosely affiliated with a non-denominational community said, "The God that I was taught

about and sort of where I am at spiritually now is all about love" (Ammerman, 2013a, p.

46). Respondent Laura described a friend, who she says is not a spiritual practitioner, as

"one of the best people I know. He's just a good person. He tries to live his life in a very

moral way" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 46). Despite this shared outlook on the importance of

helping others, Ammerman heard significantly more stories of voluntary service from

affiliated respondents than non-affiliated (Ammerman, 2013a, pp. 219–222), who more

often responded to perceived needs with financial donations or political action. There are

exceptions. Unaffiliated respondent Carolyn spoke about her current experience of living

in a co-housing community:

> I just have this sense that knowing your neighbors and caring about your neighbors
> and being in each other's lives is something natural to being human. So I try to build
> community in a lot of different ways; it's really important to me. So that's part of, I
> guess, almost a part of my spiritual life, really. (Ammerman, 2013a, pp. 227–228)

The hesitancy in her response is interesting. Affiliated respondents overall were able to

better articulate the connection between their social action and their spirituality, which is

understandable as churches can provide the language and structures for these actions to

occur. Ammerman also found that unaffiliated respondents were "more likely to talk

about individual rights and individual worth as their moral guide, rather than focusing on

the more other-directed Golden Rule ethic that dominates among religious participants"

(Ammerman, 2013a, p. 249). Mercadante's findings were similar. When SBNR

respondents were asked about their spiritual commitments, the responses were

overwhelmingly focused on personal growth and development as the best way to contribute to the needs of the world. Despite objecting to this finding at a talk given by Mercadante, respondent Emily also prioritized self-development: "Everyone's true calling supports the common good, and it would actually be a good thing if they invested their resources into developing that calling" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 167). Respondent Jack talked about making "little changes in myself…That's how you change the world" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 166). Jack had the spiritual goal of being in a better mood, which would impact those around him. Respondent Deborah expressed her spiritual goal as "trying to do as little damage as possible to others…I would like to extend to people as much love and kindness as I can without sacrificing myself" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 166). This is definitely different from the self-sacrificing narrative of many religious traditions. Mercadante's summarization of the SBNR spiritual goals as "personal spiritual growth, even self-transcendence, rather than the direct improvement of society" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 166) are reflected in many of the materials and products being marketed to the SBNR population.

The Ideal Community

What would an ideal community look like for the respondents in these studies? Respondents shared similar visions, but most had not found it, nor were they searching for it. Becky said: "It would have to be something that was always evolving, always changing, different presenters, different points of view, with the group never saying this is what we believe, this is what we are always going to do" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 189). The importance of a comforting and emotionally supportive community was articulated

by many, as was the desire for an already-existing situation. Boomer Penny said, "The ideal spiritual group would be a healthy one that I would not have to found myself, and [I could] go and sit and it would be wonderful and I would be home" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 191). A GenXer respondent replied,

> …just a group of people that, not even necessarily like-minded…just that are there for you, that understand that you need to express who you are, even if your beliefs are different…and basically just being there for anything, for campfires, for singing, for anything. (Mercadante, 2014, p. 191)

The ideal group for most of her respondents was one that met their personal needs, and if it ceased to do so, they would feel very free to move on. The perfect community, of course, tends to be idealized, and is rarely achieved. The necessity for personal investment and effort entailed in working toward it is not something most of the SBNR respondents are willing to engage in, nor do they see the need to do so.

The respondents in these studies have shown how comfortable they are with being their own authority, their own "church," and for some, even their own sense of the divine. Personal experience trumps any outside authority for most, although many do turn to teachers to learn spiritual and personal development practices and for inspiration. There are high, even unrealistic expectations for spiritual communities, including some that would not make for a healthy cohesive community in any context. Many contemporary people have fewer experiences of long-term communities that weather storms and change, grow together, hurt each other at times, but continue to be strong. As such, they know little about the richness and depth of these experiences, and so they are viewed as a barrier to one's spirituality as opposed to a nurturing place for it. Respondents are finding

positive elements of community in gatherings outside of religious settings, but they are typically shorter-term, fairly fluid and easily left behind.

In the next chapter, we explore the metaphor of spiritual migration through the life of Clare, a composite character representing our study respondents. We accompany her as she faces three life challenges on her migratory path from the Catholicism of her childhood to new ways of understanding herself and her spirituality, focusing on the role of religious authority and community and how these inform her journey.

Chapter Six - Lonely Mystics: The Great Migration of the SBNR

The movement away from strict religious affiliation and toward experiences of personal transcendence, a turn to inner authority and more fluid forms of community can rightly be called a migration. Individuals may or may not have started out as religiously affiliated, however, there is a cultural shift that encompasses people on a spectrum of starting points and locations on a personal path that appears to be distinctive. Although one's physical life is not necessarily threatened, there are inherent risks on this migratory path including the potential loss of spiritual identity, community ties, connection to the divine, personal wellbeing, and family cohesiveness as generations continue on the path, often without the markers and signposts of those who came before them. As with any migration, at its core is a hope for more authentic and meaningful living. In this chapter, I will use the metaphor of migration to describe the contemporary situation and identity of spiritual migrants, the forces and disappointments that motivate the choices to leave religious traditions, their hopes for the future and the personal and cultural resistance encountered in the process. What do they discover? Where are they tempted to stop and why? What roles do mediated forms of spirituality play in helping the travelers find new, if perhaps temporary spiritual homes, or at least nourishment for the road? What is potentially lost in this process? Peoples' experiences vary widely, of course, as we will discover.

The metaphors of travel, migration and itinerancy have been employed by scholars in diverse fields, including anthropology, history and cultural studies[20] to describe the process of movement from one way of living to another (Tweed, 2006, p. 58). In the field of religious studies, John Barbour wrote about the deconversion process away from religious affiliation as a movement through doubt, criticism of what was once accepted, emotional pain, and the leaving of a community (Barbour, 1994, p. 2). Scholars in the Bielefeld study took the religious migration theme further, naming "deconversion trajectories" including a "secularizing exit" as a movement away from any type of religious practice or affiliation; a "privatizing exit," where one builds his or her own spiritual life apart from a religious community, and a "heretical exit," where one becomes affiliated with what others might designate as a cult or a group outside of conventional religious beliefs or practice (Streib, Hood, Keller, & Azari, 2009, pp. 25–28). Mercadante also uses this language, naming as "immigrants" those who have moved from one spiritual home to another and are in the process of learning to fit in and belong. There were not many "immigrant" respondents in Mercadante's study, however, because immigration refers to arriving and intending to stay in a new place, and most of the people she encountered were content to continue on the path in a variety of ways. The SBNR study respondents reflect all of these movements and experiences, making this metaphor a meaningful and illustrative tool. I will suggest that the engagement of practical theology with spiritual migration is one of accompaniment, mutual learning,

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[20] See James Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7. Paul Carter, *Living in a new country: History, traveling and language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 101. Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, culture, identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

bearer of nourishment, care of souls, witness to the revelatory and proclamation to the larger world of discoveries made on the journey; the migratory path itself is the locus for practical theological engagement. This calls for positive theological assumptions about this population and the ways they are creating lives of meaning.

Migration is a multi-faceted concept, referring to the movement of people from one place to another, crossing boundaries and/or borders in the process of settling temporarily or permanently in a new location. Emigration refers to the leaving of a place, while immigration refers to the place where one arrives. Within this structure of leaving, moving and potentially arriving, there are other concepts and possibilities reflecting the deep complexity of the spiritual migration process. The SBNR interviewees we have been learning about embody many of these nuanced elements, and considering these related concepts may provide additional complexity and insight. For some, the process may be seen as an exodus, where many people leave a place or a belief system together, at the same time. Another experience is one of an individual odyssey or a quest; a long and arduous effort to find something meaningful, and the resulting experiences that inform one's understandings and knowing. For others it may be more of a seemingly directionless roaming or wandering, with occasional sojourns where one finds rest and nourishment for a time. There are other related terms and expressions which also evoke elements of the experience of moving from one place to another, including separation, setting forth, taking leave, sauntering, wandering, and others we can imagine. The image of migratory birds moving back and forth between places that meet their needs for a time and then moving on is also helpful. These words and concepts are evocative, and provide

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a way to better grasp the migratory journey and the experiences of those who want

something important that organized religion either no longer offers them, or with which

they are either unable or unwilling to engage for a variety of reasons.

Because practical theology is "both constructive and imaginative, not simply

reflective and repetitive" (Foley, 2013, p. 11), I offer the story of a fictional woman, a

composite character based on the experiences of the many study respondents. We will

"trace the sacred" as we (practical theologians) accompany her through life experiences

on her migratory path, conversing along the way with Karl Rahner, mediated post-secular

spirituality and the authors and respondents of the studies we have been exploring. I use

Ganzevoort's model of "tracing the sacred" to better understand how people today,

especially those outside of religious traditions, engage with what they consider "sacred"

or important in their lives, also named as "fullness" by Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2009). In

an effort to explore contemporary lived religion, Ganzevoort's model offers four steps for

the practical theologian including travelling, following, studying and sketching.

First, tracing as travelling involves accompaniment, openness to the new and a

willingness to be affected and even changed by the people and ideas discovered. He

suggests that practical theology is "itinerant scholarship;" not without solid

methodologies, but of a more interpretive and circular nature than some other fields. The

one who accompanies is a fellow traveler, he says, and not an "omniscient narrator"

(Ganzevoort, 2009, pp. 5–6).

Second, tracing as following refers to the place where the practical theologian

stands in his or her own faith and beliefs. What or whom are we following? What

compels us? It is important for the practical theologian to know their own location and impetus; my own belief is that I am following God and being faithful precisely *by* being open to the unexpected and even potentially unorthodox practices and beliefs encountered. This assumes a belief in God's continuing involvement with the world---if God is bringing something new to birth, it will look different! Karl Rahner, in his own Christian context, demonstrated his stance of openness to the "other" in the ways he engaged with charismatic Catholics, for example, whom many in the institutional church dismissed as people with overwrought religious emotions (Egan, 2013, p. 49).

Third, tracing as studying is a second order process of exploring the "footprints of God" in a "reconstructive and empirical mode" (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 6). How does the practical theologian recognize and perceive these traces, and how do contemporary spiritual seekers connect their own experiences with the sacred? Can their experience help us understand our own "following" in a new way? A commitment to learning from the experiences of spiritual seekers may provide answers.

Finally, tracing as sketching is a constructive and visionary theological project combining the reality of contemporary lived religion with the "original image of the sacred" as we understand it, for the purpose of living faithfully and "changing the world" (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 6). This model provides a structure for accompaniment as we wander, roam, explore, sojourn, and venture forth on the migratory path with our lonely mystic.

The Lonely Mystic

Clare is 35 years old, single, and a software designer. She is a heterosexual white woman who grew up in the Midwest in a middle class, observant Catholic family. The youngest of three children; she celebrated the childhood initiation sacraments including Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation, and attended weekly Mass with her family until she was in her mid-teens. At this time, her parents' marriage went through a rocky period, culminating in divorce when Clare was 17. The family no longer attended Mass on a regular basis, and the Catholic foundations and routines of her childhood were gradually abandoned as a result of the unhappiness and increasing tension in the family. Church friends also drifted away as the family became less engaged in parish activities and functions. Her parents went to their pastor for counseling early in the process, but they did not find his advice to be helpful. Neither partner believed the priest understood their situation and felt that he disapproved of them for even considering the option of splitting up. This was confusing for them because divorce, although traumatic and discouraged by the Church, was a culturally accepted reality, and their expectation was that their spiritual home would offer more support than it did. After the divorce, Clare's mother eventually returned to the church, but Clare left for college and never looked back. She continued to self-identify as Catholic, but she thought of it as a cultural or secular label as opposed to affiliative.

The practice of using a religious label in a secular context is common in Judaism, where many people today identify themselves as "secular Jews." It is also being used in other traditions including Catholicism. Catholic practical theologian Tom Beaudoin

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defines secular Catholics as "baptized Catholics who…find their Catholicism existentially 'in play' at some level that cannot be dispensed with, but do not or cannot make of it a regular and central set of explicit and conscious practices" (Beaudoin, 2011, p. 24). Referred to by themselves and others as "fallen away," "lapsed," or "recovering," the connotation is pejorative and I affirm his suggestion that their praxis be viewed and studied in a more positive light, which is one of the aims of this project.

For Clare, movie scenes, stories of friends and religious holidays bring back strong and emotional memories of going to Mass, the beauty and comfort of community prayer and ritual and the many family friends she had known through her parish, with whom she is no longer connected. This was a time she remembers being known, loved and consistently welcomed as part of a significant and meaningful community. These memories make her feel sad and remind her of all of the losses she suffered as a teenager, so she adopts a coping mechanism where she imagines tucking the memories away into a large chest, closing the lid and pushing it to the back of her closet. This has been helpful, but Clare knows she will need to address these life experiences and their continuing call at some point.

Raised in a politically progressive Democratic household, Clare votes if an issue or candidate is especially important to her; however, she does not have much faith in the political system and often feels overwhelmed by the problems of the world and her perceived lack of agency in working for change. Clare believes we are called to help the needy, but with her demanding job and travel, sees service to the community as something she will engage in some day in the future. She makes an effort to be kind to

others, contributes financially to some charities, and would say she believes in the Golden Rule. She believes people are inherently good, and loving other people, even when they are difficult, is an important value for her, as are a nonjudgmental and tolerant stance toward others.

If asked whether or not she believes in God, she would answer "yes." Deeply formed in the Catholic tradition of her childhood, Clare has an image of God as loving, forgiving and immanent. She talks to God and prays, and although she can't completely explain it, she believes God is watching out for her. She frequently wears a cross necklace given to her by her grandparents at her First Communion, and sees this as an important part of her identity. Clare also believes that miracles are possible, and that there are things that are beyond human comprehension or explanation. She considers herself "spiritual," but doesn't know how this plays into a sense of meaning in her life; she vaguely knows that her spirituality should inform her purpose and place in life, but she is unable to pull these strands together at this point.

Clare thinks her inability to clearly articulate her spirituality comes from her difficult past. She blames the church for not providing more help with her parents' marital problems, and believes their church community abandoned her family. After all, it was a priest who judged her parents, and the people they considered to be friends who did not live up to the ideal of a committed, caring community. In addition to sadness, Clare also feels angry and cannot imagine placing her trust in a fallible, human religious leader, or becoming vulnerable in a community again. This isn't God's fault; however,

she believes the church got in the way of her relationship with God.[21] *Clare believes*

she's better off connecting with God on her own, although she's not always sure how to

effectively accomplish this. We will accompany Clare through three significant times in

her life: a quest during a time of longing for the spiritual feelings of her childhood, the

passage she makes her way through at the sudden illness and impending death of her

mother, and her decision after her mother's death to intentionally focus on her personal

self development, which she identifies as her spirituality.

Longing for More – The Quest

Clare frequently experiences a longing and desire for deeper spiritual connection

to something larger than herself and to feel the spiritual and moving emotions she used to

when she attended Mass and other church celebrations. She especially remembers

candle-lit midnight Masses and Easter Vigils and how she felt so close to God, and filled

with love for the friends and family around her. She confides in a friend from work, Jen,

who practices alternative spiritualities and talks about altered consciousness and

mystical experiences. Jen and Clare have often discussed their reasons for leaving the

religious traditions of their childhoods. Jen is passionate about the wisdom found in all

religions; she wants, as Leigh Schmidt has said, "to have a little bit of all religions…the

piety of the world" (Schmidt, 2005). Jen has also awakened Clare to the injustices

perpetuated by many religious communities in regards to the GLBTQ community, the

role of women and exclusionary teachings about salvation, among others. Clare finds

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[21] This is a critique that others have leveled, including Rahner, who wrote: The Church can be an oppressive burden for the individual's spirituality by doctrinalism, legalism and ritualism, to which true spirituality, if it really is authentic and genuine, can have no positive relationship (Rahner, 1986, p. 25).

their conversations challenging in a good way, however, she often wonders how the positive experiences she had as a child cohere with the obvious shortcomings of religious communities.

As Clare tells Jen about missing the emotionally powerful religious experiences of her childhood, Jen asks her if she has felt anything comparable since she's left the church. After some reflection, Clare realizes that she has, but she had never equated these experiences with her earlier ones that seemed somehow, more sacred, more authentic. Clare loves to rock climb and hike. With her friend, she talks about the feelings of appreciation and awe for the beauty and complexity found in nature, for her own skill and for her sense of accomplishment. She experiences transcendence, a rising above the ordinary in these activities and they are often deeply moving for her.

For Clare, being in nature allows her to fully relax, to be herself and to experience peace. She feels centered, calm, and connected at these times to what she understands as God, the one who created all that she is enjoying, and it is in these settings where she is most likely to pray. Her conversations with Jen enable Clare to see these experiences as sacred, deep and worthwhile and help her realize that the spiritual feelings of her childhood remain available to her, just in a different context. She has also begun to acknowledge the spiritual possibilities in other parts of her life, and this feels both exciting and right for her.

Clare would agree with Bregman who characterizes activities in nature as enhancing "our sense of connectedness, linking us to an order and sense of beauty and peace beyond our normal selves" (Bregman, 2014, p. 136). There is a long history of

finding experiences described as spiritual in nature. John Muir wrote extensively about

the formative elements of the wild, including this excerpt:

> This sudden splash into pure wildness—baptism in Nature's warm heart—how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaches her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us. Here without knowing it we still were at school; every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us. (Muir, 2013, p. 63)

The appreciation for activities in nature and understanding them as spiritual was

expressed by both religious and non-religious respondents in the studies we have looked

at (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 258); however, it was mainly and unsurprisingly the theistic

respondents who typically spoke of the beauty of nature in the context of God's creation.

> Scholar Gail Wells says that nature-based spirituality,

> …offers a certain kind of comfort—not the comfort that comes from the hope of heaven or from collective worship of an agreed-upon deity…but the comfort that comes from laying down the restless search for meaning, from finding a touchstone against which to measure one's individual life. (Wells, 2008, p. 246)

Throughout his writing and teaching, Karl Rahner emphasizes the immanence of God and

God's self-giving desire for connection with creation. Rahner urges people to "take the

statement that the Logos became flesh really seriously…the Incarnation appears as the

necessary and permanent beginning of the divinization of the world as a whole" (Rahner,

1978, pp. 180–181). Matter and spirit are unified, and it is only through our human

experiences of creation that we can know God and know ourselves. All of reality is

grounded as God's creation and human beings are both spirit and matter. Openness to this

reveals that matter, nature in this case, is the entryway to "an otherness" (Fischer, 2005,

p. 63); a reality larger than ourselves. Rahner writes, "Spirit is the single person insofar as

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he (sic) becomes conscious of himself in an absolute presence to himself" (Rahner, 1978, p. 183). A person then, becomes spiritual or grows in their spirituality precisely by interacting with the matter of the natural world. Knowledge of and relationship with God are nurtured through our engagement with who and what surround us. While Rahner would encourage Clare toward involvement in a Christian community, he would affirm her experiences in nature as authentically spiritual.

Mediated post-secular spiritualities encourage the turn to nature in a variety of ways. Some examples from the fifty plus products listed under "nature" on the Sounds True website illustrate this. "Brainwaves Nature Sounds"[22] by Dr. Jeffrey Thompson incorporates ocean waves, rainforest, bird songs and thunderstorms to stimulate positive states of consciousness and contribute to health, relaxation, inner exploration, and wellbeing. "Medical intuitive" Carolyn Myss offers a guided visualization titled "Your Primal Nature,"[23] in which she promotes aligning one's self with the power of nature drawing on pagan spiritual roots, using nature sounds recorded in an Amazon rainforest. Another example is Starhawk's "Earth Magic," offering rituals for "connecting to nature's power."[24] Starhawk is well known in Pagan and Wiccan spiritual circles for the practice of "authentic magic," defined as "the ability to tap the ever-present enchantment of our world."

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[22] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/brainwave-nature-sounds-1535.html

[23] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/your-primal-nature-3689.html

[24] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/earth-magic-3979.html

If Clare wants to delve deeper into the pagan roots of the power of nature or better understand brainwave-mapping research to enhance states of consciousness, the resources are readily available in accessible formats. But perhaps it's enough for her to learn to recognize her experiences in nature as "spiritual" or "sacred" and to be enriched by that knowledge through her conversations with Jen. This process of reframing meaningful life experiences is a significant part of the process of the construction of one's spirituality, as the studies have demonstrated.

Encountering Traumatic Loss and Grief – The Passage

Clare's father died several years ago, and although she mourned his loss, their relationship had languished. Since the divorce was the result of an affair with a woman he worked with and subsequently married, Clare had been somewhat estranged from her father. Now she was facing something more challenging. Her mother had been recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and it is rapidly advancing. Clare doesn't know what to do with her grief and realizes she doesn't have the spiritual tools or practices to help her cope with this crisis. Her mother encourages her to pray the rosary and to go back to church, but Clare cannot bring herself to do these things. Outside of any religious or spiritual community, she has little access to "sacred storylines" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 285) to draw on, so Clare turns to a secular grief counselor. John is not a pastoral counselor or affiliated with any religious tradition; however, he does consider his work to be spiritual in nature and his holistic approach allows him to incorporate spiritual wisdom from many sources, both religious and secular. John introduces Clare to resources for managing stress including "Living Without Stress or Fear" by Thich Nhat

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Hahn[25], a Vietnamese Zen master.[26] John knows of Clare's troubled Catholic history, and hopes this alternative spiritual approach will be helpful for her, as it has been for other clients of his.[27] In her own search for resources, Clare discovers "Neurosculpting for Stress Relief" by Lisa Wimberger,[28] described as "scientifically grounded" guided meditations geared toward retraining the brain for healthy responses to stress. She is intrigued by the scientific approach, and adds it to her growing repertoire of helpful spiritual resources.

Clare finds herself reflecting on what happens after death. She is not sure what she believes about this, and finds it hard to believe in what she perceives is a traditional notion of Heaven as only for a select few, based on judgment. For her, belief in any sort of afterlife seems childish and superstitious. She sees it as a means of religious control, a false hope to keep people in line and insure good behavior. Clare remembers her early Catholic education where she learned that God loved her uniquely and wanted to be in relationship with her now and after her death, and that she had a soul that would live on. She also remembers being taught that Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection was a model for humanity's own journey and an assurance of eternal life; however, these theological ideas are far removed from her current experience, and no longer carry much

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[25] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/living-without-stress-or-fear-200.html

[26] Interestingly, in the description for this product, there is no mention of "Buddhism," as Tami Simon noted. Instead, the tenets of this belief system are spelled out without being labeled as Buddhist: mindfulness, freedom from suffering and compassion.

[27] There are 28 products listed under "stress relief" on the *Sounds True* website.

[28] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/neurosculpting-for-stress-relief-5854.html

relevancy. Her friend Jen talks a lot about a higher power, karma and reincarnation, and they have many discussions about these ideas. Jen believes in a version of a Creator that is in the process of learning how not to inflict suffering on humanity with the help of human beings. This deity needs humanity in order to learn how to be compassionate and good. For her, karma and the afterlife are not impersonal choices but rather individual decisions created by one's beliefs. There is no external judge, just your own sense of what's right for you. Jen believes it takes many lives to reach perfection, and that mistakes, even serious ones, along the way provide lessons for both the perpetrator and the victim. She also says that the experience of déjà vu proves that people have lived past lives and are continuing to expand their consciousness. The individual self, she believes, is headed on a trajectory toward absorption into the Source, but one has potentially endless lifetimes on the way to get it right (Mercadante, 2014, pp. 193–226).

Clare appreciates some of Jen's ideas, but also finds them confusing and disconnected from a coherent belief system. As she revisits her own beliefs, she wonders what it means to her if she doesn't believe in Heaven or if she wants a church funeral for herself someday. Her mother does want a funeral Mass, and they've talked about what this will entail; the thought of talking to the priest about planning this is very stressful, so Clare's mother has written out her wishes for music and scripture readings at the service. This experience has also caused Clare to ask the classic questions of theodicy: Why would God let her mother die at such a young age? How could God do this to her after all her mother suffered in the divorce? She doesn't understand her mother's calm acceptance of her fate, or the way she talks about the blessings that have come from this

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experience. For Clare right now, the focus is on how to get through each day of her

mother's illness, and then figure out how to deal with her death.

John encourages her to adopt practices such as meditation, exercise or yoga as

practical ways of coping. Clare learns of a yoga studio near her home and begins

attending classes weekly, sometimes twice a week. She appreciates how much better the

stretching exercises make her body feel and she especially enjoys the meditation time at

the end of each class. Clare has become more comfortable with completely relaxing into

the experience and the silence, and often feels spiritually nourished by this. An element of

the classes, which she initially avoided, includes sitting in a circle on the floor after class

and being served tea by their yoga instructor. Each person shares something he or she

has received or experienced that day, and the instructor offers his or her observations. As

Clare continues to challenge herself to stay for this, she is beginning to get to know some

of the other regular students, and appreciates the supportive and encouraging

environment. Several of the women have become friends, and occasionally meet outside

of class. The positive sense of community and support Clare experiences here is

surprising to her, and she has opened up to her new friends about the difficult time she's

having with her mother's illness and impending death. She sometimes wonders why it's

easier for her to connect in this setting as opposed to others.

Yoga has religious roots in Hinduism, however, contemporary practitioners are using

it in a wide variety of ways, and so it is a good example of how a practice differs within

its religious contexts and outside of it. Disciplines such as yoga were developed over long

periods of time for specific religious purposes with multi-layered meanings. Does

someone who extracts the postures and meditation from the original meaning systems have the same expectations as yoga's founders? Most likely not. Are there "residual benefits" which are experienced? Yes, however, the residual elements of the practice will not produce the "original results" intended (Bregman, 2014, pp. 44–45). Mercadante echoes Bregman's concerns with borrowing elements of religious traditions. Citing Will Herberg's reference to a "cut flower culture," she reflects on the difference between perennial blooms and flowers that have been removed from their roots. They may be just as beautiful for a season, but lack the staying power of a rooted plant (Mercadante, 2014, p. 238). Despite the critique leveled at the co-option of yoga and other practices, something new is being created, it is meaningful for many, and it is important to acknowledge this reality. I understand the inherent potential for watering down and even losing the original intent of a practice, however, as a semi-regular participant in yoga classes, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to co-opt elements of the practice that are helpful for me. Perhaps this makes me part of the "cut flower culture," but I wonder if we can instead see it as a sharing of elements of a tradition that can contribute to human flourishing while leaving the deeper understanding and participation in a tradition to those who are called to this.

After her mother's death, Clare returns to her search for resources, and discovers "The Grief Process; Meditations for Healing" by Ondrea and Stephen Levine[29] and "Transforming Grief" by Marilyn Schlitz.[30] The Levines are prolific authors who write

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[29] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/the-grief-process-3469.html

[30] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/transforming-grief.html

about the mind/body relationship. They approach resolving grief through meditation and awareness training. Social anthropologist and author Dr. Schlitz "offers insights to help us tap our innate resiliency, courage, and compassion, along with practical ways to honor and work through our grief." She suggests redefining grief as focusing on what the loved one gave rather than on what was lost through death.[31] *Clare also reconnects with her therapist John, who recommends she join a grief support group he is facilitating; something which Clare declines to do. The thought of opening up to people she doesn't know and exposing her grief is disturbing, and she really doesn't want to be brought down by the mourning of others either. How depressing, she thinks, to sit around listening to sad stories and feeling obligated to provide comfort to strangers with a commitment to show up every week. Her old fears of the potential dangers of community involvement return, and she is convinced this would not be a good choice for her. Clare enjoys the yoga community that has developed, and although some of the people have become friends, it feels lighter and less burdensome; nothing like what she imagines a grief support group might be. Clare continues to meet with John and finds the meditation training to be helpful as she continues to navigate this passage to learning to care for herself in a difficult time of loss.*

Suppose Clare had been pointed toward Rahner, a theologian committed to addressing pastoral and spiritual concerns from her own generational tradition. What might he bring to the conversation on grief and loss? For Rahner, God is best and most intensely experienced in the disappointments and losses of our lives: "…wherever space

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[31] There are currently 256 products listed under "grief and loss" on the *Sounds True* website.

is really left by parting, by death, by renunciation, by apparent emptiness…--there God

is" (Rahner, 1966, p. 77). He goes on to describe specific human experiences where this

"basic experience of God" can happen:

> Somewhere, someone seems to be weeping hopelessly…and knows if he (sic) now
> gives in—that there is nothing more than he could seize on, on which he could set his
> hopes, that this attitude is worthwhile. Someone enters into a final solitude where no
> one accompanies him. Someone has the basic experience of being stripped even of his
> very self. A man as spirit in his love for truth reaches…the frontier of the absolute,
> about which he has no longer anything to say. There is a time when object, ground
> and horizon…merge…into one another. Wherever these things happen, God is really
> already present and available… (Rahner, Experiencing God, 1986, pp. 63–64)

Rahner is advocating for the theological notion of "surrender" to the reality of pain and

loss, with the assurance of comfort, healing and God's presence, even amidst the

suffering. How does this differ from the secular approaches offered by Schlitz and the

Levines? A cursory analysis suggests that all of these approaches encourage a direct

engagement with one's loss, encountering the "frontier of the absolute," and connecting

with one's "innate resiliency." As a spokesperson for Christianity, Rahner's assertion of

the presence of the Divine is not an add-on, but rather the ground for all of life and its

experiences, whether recognized by the individual or not. As he wrote, "It is both terrible

and comforting to dwell in the inconceivable nearness of God, and so to be loved by God

Himself that the first and last gift is infinity and inconceivability itself. But we have no

choice. God is with us" (Rahner, 1995, p. 3). This conviction of the reality of God's

presence is obviously not held by all people. Some of the study respondents expressed

this belief as important to them even if they did not identify as religious, while others

abandoned it along with the rest of the teachings of their former religious traditions.

Rahner's views on the individual and the afterlife differ greatly from Clare's

friend Jen and many of the SBNR study respondents. He writes: "Our death is a

culmination of the unrepeatable onceness of our personal human existence" (Rahner,

1986, p. 295). For Rahner, death is human finality as well as our final choice to be with

or against God in a "radical and questionless existence" (Rahner, 1986, p. 296). There are

no answers about what this afterlife consists of, however, it is clear that reincarnation is

not an option. Interestingly, the notion of choice does appear in both understandings. For

Jen, there is an element of choice in reincarnation, while for Rahner, the choice is to

choose God or not, thereby determining the afterlife one will experience. He describes

this: "It is either the blessed abandonment of Christ, or the unholy expulsion into the

outer darkness that is eternally impregnated with hate" (Rahner, 1986, p. 296). This black

and white depiction illustrates much of what contemporary SBNR people object to in

traditional religious understandings of the afterlife. However, what could be perceived of

as beautiful, affirming and even consoling, the notion of an unrepeatable self deeply

loved by God, and the living on of the individual soul, are often dismissed (and lost) as

well. This is representative of the engagement of contemporary post-secular spirituality

with traditional religious beliefs and ideals, and recalls the complex issues around the

extraction and co-optation of practices such as yoga. Important knowings get lost and left

behind, and the search to rediscover these results in "new knowledge," or perhaps instead

a recontextualization of insights for a new reality, distinct from the original. Ancient

wisdom is continually being rediscovered and repackaged as something original; a reality

constant throughout human history with all of its inherent potential losses.

Constructing A Spirituality – The Sojourn

The events and experiences of the last year have caused Clare to think about her life and herself in new ways. She has begun to unpack the imaginary chest in her closet and found that although it can be painful, she has been (forcibly at times) moved in new directions on her path, which has added complexity and meaning to her life. She describes this process to her friends as "going deeper;" and believes she is beginning to understand that leaving religion behind doesn't mean she can't have spiritual experiences or a more consistent connection with the Divine. Her yoga friends, who have continued to be important in her life, inspire her. Many of them identify as spiritual but not religious, and take their spiritual development quite seriously. They have recommended classes to Clare, some of which they've taken together. They've also started a "listening" group with a commitment to listening to spiritual teachers on topics including happiness, mindfulness, awareness, centering and meditation. They listen to the selected audio and visual teachings on their own and come together for discussion, much like a book group. Through this intentional practice and learning, Clare hopes to become a better person and achieve a sense of inner peace and a deeper knowledge of the meaning of her life. As one of her friends put it, they are "seeking the mystical truth that lies within" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 40). We now explore some of the resources Clare and her friends are turning to.

Of the audio products that come up on the Sounds True website under "Spiritual Journey" when listed by "best sellers", there are several that Clare and her friends

believe will be helpful. These include "Radical Acceptance" by Tara Brach,[32]

"Emotional Freedom Practices" by Judith Orloff,[33] *and "Whatever Arises, Love That*[34]*"*

by Matt Kahn. They plan to begin with these and then move into learning more about

Eastern spiritual traditions next. The group is eager to begin with "Radical Acceptance,"

as one of the members heard Dr. Brach speak at a recent conference. They also believe

that because she combines Buddhist contemplative practices and Western

psychotherapeutic approaches as a meditation teacher and clinical psychologist, she will

provide a bridge for their continued learning. Dr. Brach teaches that feelings of

unworthiness and shame impact peoples' lives in many ways, including spiritual growth.

She advocates for "radical self-acceptance;" accepting and loving one's self precisely

for who they are, which also implies deeper self-knowledge. Through meditations and

teachings, she says, one can learn to let go of the belief that they are not good enough as

they begin to practice kindness, compassion and appreciation toward themselves. She

suggests this leads to a freedom, through which kindness and compassion can be

extended to others as well.[35]

The therapeutic approach to wellbeing and self-fulfillment offered by Brach and

others is foundational for the SBNR ethos. Therapeutic resources for creating a

meaningful life are valued by these study respondents above previous cultural

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[32] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/spiritual-journey/radical-self-acceptance-3512.html

[33] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/spiritual-journey/emotional-freedom-practices-475.html

[34] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/spiritual-journey/whatever-arises-love-that-1.html

[35] Brach's course is one of ninety-three products under the "Spiritual Journey" category on the *Sounds True* website to offer CE (continuing education) credits for professional development.

conventions including "obedience, sacrifice or duty" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 129). Philip

Rieff calls this shift to one's inner state as determinative as opposed to outside authority

or societal measures "the triumph of the therapeutic" (Rieff, 1966). As discussed earlier,

this "therapeutic ethos" also has implications for community, as the emphasis is shifted to

the good of the individual over and above the needs of the community. Additionally,

many study respondents expanded the notion of a therapeutic ethos to their understanding

of God. A wide variety of people in Mercadante's study, like Clare's friend Jen, believe

that the development of the self contributes to God's ongoing evolution. This led

Mercadante to reflect that it "sounded as though humans were in the role of 'God's

therapist,' helping God to become more fully the divine self" (Mercadante, 2014, pp.

108–109). This framing of the human role in God's own development was somewhat

surprising to me; claiming an authority and agency that seem excessive. However, it does

call to mind a basic tenet of process theology, the relational understanding of how God

and humanity interact and co-construct identities and reality.

Dr. Judith Orloff also contributes to the therapeutic ethos of spirituality with her

series "Emotional Freedom Practices." This audio program is a companion to her New

York Times bestseller "Emotional Freedom," and her public television special of the

same name. Dr. Orloff, using insights from psychology, biology and intuitive medicine,

teaches that it is not the experiences we have in life that form us, but rather our reactions

to them that can make us happy and help us to become the people we want to be. With

the goal of gaining "access to your own power center" during all circumstances of one's

life, Orloff offers practices, guided meditations and self-care techniques to transform

negative emotions into positive ones. Orloff, like Brach, encourages self-mastery leading to a better quality of life.

Matt Kahn moves away from the therapeutic ethos to describe himself as "an author, a spiritual teacher and a highly attuned empathic healer" (Kahn, 2007). After an out-of-body spontaneous awakening experience he had as a child, Kahn says he has been given the insight leading to his teaching and book, "Whatever Arises, Love That." He teaches that there is a loving intelligence, a divine nature at the core of every person, and that by surrendering to that love one moves towards "the awakening [of] unconditional love for the well-being of all." He names this a "Love Revolution," and claims that the practice of loving whatever comes into one's life enables one to "reconnect with your heart's innate wisdom, reclaim your lost innocence, and realize the incredible power you have by remembering that you always deserve 'more love, not less.'" On his website, he taps into some of the neuropsychological ideas of interest now, claiming that as one hears the words he's been given to speak, a shift of energy takes place causing a rebalancing of the two brain hemispheres, resulting in more stable emotions and "the elimination of stress, fear, doubt and despair," as well as self-realization.

Clare and her friends are intrigued by Kahn's ideas, especially his belief in a divine nature in every person; however, they all admit to skepticism about his lofty claims of success. They wonder about the "ascended masters and archangels" he claims to be in communication with, but are willing to hear him out, and believe it will lead to some interesting conversations and insights.

A common theme in both Ammerman's and Mercadante's studies was the turn to the inner voice or one's intuition as a guide for life. In order to do this, "each must tap into their own intuition, 'magical' power, or energy" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 74) (Ammerman, 2013b, p. 268). All three of these products encourage and provide tools for this process, while nurturing a sense of self-acceptance and love. Kahn's offering is the only one in this sampling to speak of angels, which have been the subject of much contemporary spiritual interest. Schofield Clark's study respondents spoke of angels in mostly positive ways, saying they were "inspirational" and "helpful" (Clark, 2003, p. 221). She suggests that the "what-if element" of angels has influenced and often inspired popular media and culture, raising questions about good and evil, the possibility of angels sharing their wisdom with humans and the ability of human beings to intentionally connect with these beings (Clark, 2003, p. 137). Only two other products on the Sounds True website come up when searching for angels: "Invoking Angels"[36] and "Guardian Angel Meditations,"[37] both by kabbalist Rabbi David A. Cooper. These products are for people of all faith traditions to help them develop relationships with angels, which he understands as a space or realm of energy, where God and all of God's creation can come together. He writes: "When we engage in a daily relationship with angels, our lives become filled with a vast array of heavenly sparks that inform us of the divinity within even the most mundane activities…" He suggests that this practice will result in a new perspective toward life and provide resources for courage, protection and awareness.

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[36] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/invoking-angels-4297.html

[37] http://www.soundstrue.com/store/guardian-angel-meditations-1936.html

Christianity, of course, has a rich tradition of angels (a deep exploration of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation). Rahner also wrote about angels in a variety of ways. In the 19th volume of his "Theological Investigations" he presents an essay that explores with great complexity the existence and action of angels. It is in his pastoral writing, however, that we can more easily access his understanding of the role and existence of angels. In a homily called "The Angels," he begins by quoting scripture:

> They are ministering spirits, sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation. They are servants for human beings, messengers of whom it is said that they bear the prayers of the just as in golden vessels before the throne of God, join their prayer to ours, and protect us on our way. In this way every person should be a guardian angel for the other. (Rahner, 2015)

Angels exist, then, not only for our own benefit but also as a model for how we are to care for others.

For Rahner the spiritual goals referred to above, including love and compassion for one's self, self-mastery and surrendering to (and loving) the reality of one's life, are all contained within the concept of kenosis. He believed that humanity was created for this; self-emptying and the total giving of the self, just as God has given God's self to creation. Although he acknowledges the power and benefits of knowledge, Rahner claims it is inadequate when trying to get to "the true heart of reality." In his prayer, God of Knowledge, Rahner says knowledge must "bloom into love" if it is to be transformative:

> For it is only when I am fully present to an object that I am changed by meeting it. And it is only in love that I am fully present—not in bare knowing, but in the affection engendered by knowing…Then I have knowledge which is really myself, which abides as I myself abide. (Rahner, 1999, pp. 29–30)

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According to Rahner, the only way to find one's self or to return to the self is by remaining fully present and in total surrender: "…such radical self-discovery of the subject is possible in the unconditional surrender to the mystery which we call God—a surrender which comprehends the whole of existence" (Rahner, 1981b, p. 98). One understands one's self, in this sense, by losing one's self, which Rahner believes is the essence and fulfillment of human nature. Kenosis is a well-known religious theme in both Eastern and Western traditions. Contemporary spiritual teachings on presence, mindfulness and subduing the ego echo it, although often not in the context of a response to a deity who created humanity with the capacity for this, or Jesus who modeled it.

As with the secular approaches to knowing the self and realizing one's full humanity, there are practices involved to perfect this, and for Rahner one of the most important was the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, originally written in the 16th century (Loyola, 1964). This series of dialectical meditations are traditionally and ideally undertaken over a period of four weeks under the direction of a spiritual guide. Broadly, the practice encompasses reflection on a life of grace, discernment about what God is calling one to, a realization of the sacrifice and potential suffering involved in answering this call and rejoicing with God in hope for the future. The Exercises introduce the term "indifference," which Rahner interprets as a process of freeing one's self from preference, prejudice or attachment to what gets in the way of one's relationship with God. He names this process the "handing over of [one's self] to God's good pleasure" (Rahner, 2014, p. 11). Thus kenosis is accomplished through "the love of surrender to God and Christ" (Rahner, 2014, p. 134), and incorporates the Ignatian principle of

"finding God in all things." The Ignatian worldview is comprehensive, encompassing a belief in God's presence in all people, places and life experiences. It is taught that living one's life in this belief leads to gratitude, devotion to God and a reverence for all of creation.

Interestingly, the notion of "surrender" is found in both religious and secular spiritual contexts. Rahner, however, spells out what the action of surrender, true spirituality, entails; it means facing and letting the realities of life "rise to the surface:

> …silence, fear, the ineffable longing for truth, for love, for fellowship, for God. Face loneliness, fear, imminent death! Allow such ultimate, basic human experiences to come first. Don't go talking about them, making up theories about them, but simply endure these basic experiences. Then in fact something like a primitive awareness of God can emerge. (Rahner, 1986, p. 63)

This entails practice, time and intentionality. Without the work and regular practice of reflection on and acceptance of human emotions and experience; what they teach and how God is revealed through them, the spiritual life becomes solely intellectual and conceptual. Rahner says this makes our spiritual life "of a secondary character and its conceptual-thematic expression is false…we feel that we are God's supervisors and more or less his equals" (Rahner, 1986, p. 63). This leads, he says, to a lack of credibility and a pseudo-piety, regardless of how profound the experience may seem; neither of which fulfill the potential for humanity that is desired by God.

Although our secular authors aren't overtly (or at all) theistic, there are points of agreement between them and Rahner's Christian spirituality. There is space within all of their approaches for honoring and nurturing the self, reaching out to others and living up to one's potential. There is also a shared acknowledgement in these approaches of the

need for ongoing work and a commitment to the process necessary for spiritual growth. The foundational differences come back to the locus of authority and the perceived necessity of community to achieve that spiritual growth.

Clare continues to wrestle with both of these issues as she intentionally moves forward with unpacking her chest. Her learning has added much to her life and has even eased some of her anger toward the church. As she learns more about human nature and the struggles we all face, she has been able to adopt a more forgiving attitude toward the church and toward her father. She does not anticipate ever returning to the Catholic Church, however, she is grateful for what she learned there and for the ways she was formed by its teachings.

She has come to value some elements of community, as embodied in her group of yoga and listening friends. There is kindness, support, mutual learning and fun when they are together, however, there are no expectations in terms of regular involvement, or even long-term commitment. Two of the women have already left the listening group, and another has joined them. If there are disagreements about what they will study next, they either work it out or someone moves on. Clare appreciates the low maintenance approach, and enjoys the benefits it offers her. She finds that her ideas about what a community is or should be are expanding, and agrees with Thomas Moore who urges people looking to create a spirituality of their own to count as community "all beings and objects in the universe…include animals, the things of nature, such as trees and plants, things and objects, and beings we have yet to encounter in the universe" (Moore, 2014,

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pp. 269–270). This more expansive understanding of community works for Clare and

helps her realize she is part of something important just by virtue of being human.

In terms of how she understands authority, Clare has made a lot of progress in

learning to trust her own intuition. The spiritual development work she has done has

helped her to know herself better and to come to believe that there is a true wisdom, a

divinity that resides within her. She has let go of the need for religious ritual to provide

her with experiences of transcendence or trusting in a human authority figure to provide

direction or guidance for this. If she wants to learn something, she turns to teachers who

can teach her what she needs to know. They don't have authority over her, they have

wisdom to share, and when the learning is finished, she can move on. She decides for

herself what to learn, how to grow spiritually and whom to believe or walk away from.

This has given Clare a new sense of agency and self-confidence. She has found the

courage to fully open the chest in her closet and face the sadness and disappointment

from her past. She doesn't claim to fully understand the things that happened, but she

feels a sense of peace and the ability to manage the feelings as they arise. Clare works to

foster a positive attitude, believing that focusing on good thoughts will lead to the best

reality. She continues to pray and still believes God exists and loves her; however, now

she believes that she doesn't have to go to church to connect with God, she simply needs

to face her life authentically, turning inward for wisdom and direction when needed and

to spiritual teachers who may offer something new.

A recent on-line article titled "18 Sacred Intentions to Set for 2016"

(Subramaniam, 2015) encompasses much of Clare's learning as well as some religious

truths that she would likely resonate with.[38] The article expands on each of the intentions to include descriptions of being true to yourself, trusting your intuition and inner wisdom, living authentically, giving of yourself, letting go, practicing forgiveness and cultivating peace of mind, among others. The list is instructive, and a snapshot of the SBNR ethos, in that it incorporates so many values once labeled as "religious" in combination with a uniquely American approach to spirituality. This seems to be distinctive in its mixing of multiple religious thought systems, as well as popular understandings of complex theories in psychology and science (Mercadante, 2014, p. 91).

In the final chapter, we consider the implications of the contemporary reality of the SBNR ethos that we have explored for the field of practical theology. By "tracing the sacred" in this lived reality and reflecting on the meaning of changing understandings of religious community and authority, we ask how the field itself can be informed and perhaps enriched. A critical engagement with spiritual currents running outside of traditional religious boundaries may suggest unanticipated connections and insights for all those involved.

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[38] The www.mindbodygreen.org website claims 15 million unique visitors each month and bills itself as a "lifestyle media company," with the mission of "placing health and happiness at the center of what [people] believe and how they act." The article was written by Vishnu Subrumaniam, a former divorce attorney who is now a writer and life coach (www.vishnusvirtues.com).

Chapter Seven – Conclusions and Implications

In order to move toward a constructive conclusion, it will be helpful to recap what has been discovered thus far. We have explored the concept of "spirituality" in contemporary popular discourse, and as experienced through Christian practices. We have learned about the beliefs and pastoral concerns around religious community and authority of a specific Catholic Christian theologian, Karl Rahner. We have looked at the important and varied role of mediated spirituality, with Tami Simon and the teachers she publishes weighing in on the state of contemporary post-secular spirituality from their points of view. The voices of study respondents have shed light on evolving understandings of religious authority and community in conversation with Rahner and Simon as representative of their perspectives. And, we have met Clare, the young woman who is finding her way on her own migratory path from the Catholicism of her childhood to new ways of understanding herself and her spirituality as she faces life's challenges. Before moving on to a discussion of the implications of the SBNR movement for individuals, churches, and the field of practical theology, I will flesh out how we have traced the sacred through Clare's experiences. This practical theological analysis recognizes the validity of post-secular spiritualities, although this authentication is certainly not being requested from contemporary practitioners. It may, however, be helpful for those Christian theologians who are dismissive of spirituality outside of

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traditional religious structures, as well as pastors and other practitioners who may wish to serve as fellow travelers.

Tracing the Sacred

Ganzevoort's model of "tracing the sacred" is particularly helpful in this effort, as it moves from descriptive, normative practical theological methodologies to one of accompaniment and learning. This shift acknowledges a vastly changed religious and spiritual landscape in Europe, and enables conversation among those who hold religious traditions in seemingly conflicting ways. This model offers four steps for the practical theologian including travelling, following, studying and sketching. First, tracing as travelling involves accompaniment, openness to the new and a willingness to be affected and even changed by the people and ideas discovered. Second, tracing as following refers to the place where the practical theologian stands in his or her own faith and beliefs. What or whom are we following? What compels us? Third, tracing as studying is a second order process of exploring the "footprints of God" in a "reconstructive and empirical mode" (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 6). Finally, tracing as sketching is a constructive and visionary theological project combining the reality of contemporary lived religion with the "original image of the sacred" as we understand it, for the purpose of living faithfully and "changing the world" (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 6).

We begin with tracing as *traveling*. Having accompanied Clare for a time on her spiritual journey, we have witnessed her abandonment of Catholic Christianity, her quest for a life of meaning in the face of suffering, her exploration of alternative spiritualities, and her passage from one time of life and understanding to another. This does not imply a

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settling or an immigration to somewhere, but for Clare, her current understandings and beliefs seem more like a sojourn; what she has learned has gained her a temporary landing place, from which she can comfortably continue to grow and venture forth as opportunities present themselves and as she feels moved to do so. This accompaniment and glimpse into Clare's life has revealed an authentic search for meaning, personal development and connection to God. Clare values the transcendent depth experiences she had as a child and decided to do the work necessary in order to reconnect with them in new ways. This shows determination, follow-through and commitment, all of which are important characteristics of an authentic, intentional spirituality, more so perhaps than some of Mercadante's "fuzzy faithful" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 11) who are regular church-goers but don't invest much time or energy in their spiritual development.

Thinking about my own sense of where I stand and what compels me in my work will allow us to reflect on tracing as *following*. As a Catholic practical theologian and fellow traveler, I will admit to a sense of loss in Clare's story, as she represents so many people in my own life who have left the Catholicism of their childhood behind. Many have placed the whole of the tradition into their own closet chests with no intention of unpacking them, believing religion to be superstition, with little or no relevance to contemporary intellectual society or their own lives. In conversation with some of them, I've discovered that they never did have experiences of transcendence, awe, or an awareness of something larger than themselves at work in the universe in formal religious settings. My own formative experience of God's presence throughout my life is the source, the ground of all other knowledge of the "more" in life, whether in nature, music,

beauty or love. But of course, we all participate in the world in different ways, so my sense of loss about what these people are missing also omits what I am missing in their experience. I stand with Rahner's belief, however, that the spirituality of the future "will continually discover afresh that what is apparently old and past can offer the true future to our present time" (Rahner, 1986, p. 19). This is indeed already a reality as values and ideals once labeled "religious" are being promoted and taught in secular contexts, as we have seen. I see this embodied in the lives of my non-religious family and friends as they live lives of integrity, service and generosity just because it's understood as the right thing to do, and because it coheres with their lived experience. It would appear that many of the intentional ways of living spirituality today are indeed a "following" of some overarching narrative, even if it is not named as religion.

Are these secular ways of living important shared values the "footprints of God" referred to by Ganzevoort? This is where tracing as *studying* comes in. If nothing else, they serve as a corrective to the assumption of the eclipse of religion by secularity, and the belief that religious and spiritual ways of engaging the world are no longer relevant. As the studies we have analyzed here have shown, much "spiritual activity" occurs today that encompasses more than just prayer (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 290). The spiritual practices people engage in today, according to the studies, show an expanded understanding and recognition of what is sacred in life—nature's beauty, self-discovery and connection with others—"all speak of some reality beyond the mundane self and its interests" (Ammerman, 2013a, p. 292). This spiritual view of the world often translates into action, or at least a positive stance, as we have seen, which does not seem to be

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dependent on the acknowledgement of a deity. Many of the study participants experience the spiritual and the secular as deeply intertwined rather than disassociated, and their intersections spark creative new expressions of how to best be human.[39] The abundance of contemporary post-secular spiritual expressions provides empirical evidence of the "remains of the sacred," as well as hints of reconstructive possibilities both for religious traditions and non-religious spiritual practitioners.

Finally, returning our focus to spiritual community and authority, what have we discovered on Clare's migratory path, and what are the *sketchy*, constructive possibilities for "envisioning and developing a world in which we can live faithfully" (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 6)? We have learned that Clare had meaningful spiritual experiences as a child and that it was important for her to reconnect with those. Allowing herself to reframe her secular experiences of transcendence enabled her to recognize the sacred and connect with God in previously unexpected contexts. Receiving counseling, reading, and listening to contemporary spiritual teachers gave her new skills for coping with stress, loss and grief. Listening to therapeutic-oriented teachers provided her with insights into her own agency and authority and helped her begin to trust her inner wisdom. Community played a new and surprisingly spiritual role for Clare; she challenged herself to connect with others and was pleased when this paid off in friendship, support and mutual learning, although she drew the line at the deeper intimacy of a grief support group. Clare believes this has been a time of growth for her, and is at peace with where she is now, while remaining open to further spiritual learning and development. Although this sojourn may

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[39] (Ammerman, 2013a, pp. 300–301)

last for only a season, Clare's initiative on her migratory path has paid off in self-understanding, connection with others, and a new sense of agency in meeting her needs.

This version of "living faithfully" differs in some respects from more traditional understandings of Christian faithfulness; however, there are also commonalities. For Clare, these include a belief in God, becoming the person she was created to be, supporting and receiving the support of others, and knowing how best to care for herself. By the standards of traditional Christian practice, Clare is missing church attendance and participation in ritual worship, professing a shared belief with others, and commitment to affiliation and ongoing formation in a specific religious tradition. Despite what can be characterized as "missing," Clare shows us how this migratory path, the reality of lived religion for many people today, can be walked with intentionality and authenticity.

Clare and others like her are choosing not to stand under the traditional "sacred canopy" (Berger, 1990) of religious affiliation, although the terminology itself is now contested.[40] The vast numbers of people leaving religious traditions, however, suggests there is more going on than simply individual choices. There was a long period of time when the option of leaving was inconceivable; if one had an issue with a priest or other authority figure, one worked it out or moved to a different parish. To separate one's self from the religious tribe had significant consequences; the parish provided religious, social, and practical nourishment and was a major element of one's very identity in the world. Larger cultural forces are at play here; it is not just individuals packing away the

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[40] Or, as Rahner describes it, "The poor Church of sinners, the tent of the pilgrim people of God, pitched in the desert and shaken by all the storms of history, the Church laboriously seeking its way into the future, groping and suffering many internal afflictions, striving over and over again to make sure of its faith…(Rahner, 1986, p. 25).

sacred canopy or the tent pitched in the desert, but rather the evolving nature "of a common moral and religious narrative" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 236).

Perhaps a new sacred canopy has been pitched in many post-secular Western cultures, with shared features of therapeutic meaning-making and porosity in engagement, but with less rigid borders. Elaine Graham's description of a "co-existence of resurgence, decline, and mutation" (Graham, 2014, p. 235) of religion in a post-secular age has proven apt, as we have analyzed the experiences of spiritual identity construction engaged in by study respondents. These emerging spiritual expressions are obviously an important source of personal fulfillment for many, as well as the potential contribution they offer to the broader project of human wellbeing.

Because I have highlighted themes of authority in this analysis, many resonances with the work of James Fowler have emerged. Fowler, in his individual description of faith development, traces the shifts of authority in the faith development of his participants. Initially authority is given to trusted adults in the life of an adolescent/young adult. In his normative vision of faith development, in some adults that authority rightfully shifted to the internal authority of the adult in a move of individuation. Eventually, in mid-life, the self-authored faith failed to sustain meaning-making, and began to be given back to symbols and traditions outside of the self that were deemed to have wisdom to sort through the complexity and losses experienced over the course of a lifetime (Fowler, 1995). In this brief outline, one can see how Fowler's description of individual faith development has resonances with the journey of Clare and other participants described in the studies we have analyzed.

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My own tracing of the sacred raises questions of whether Fowler's analysis may have captured a descriptive account of a larger social shift in religious belief and expression. Can the migratory paths Clare and those she represents are moving along be understood as developmental, or are they culturally driven? Or is the reality a combination of both? Certainly, Fowler's descriptions of characteristics in moving from his Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) to Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith) incorporate elements of Clare's journey. From her Stage 3 location, she has become aware of her "ideology," and has spent time examining it. She has invested effort in developing her "personal myth," through self-discovery and learning from others. She has left behind the church of her childhood and its unquestioned authority in her life through critical reflection on her beliefs and values. As Clare's life becomes more complex and she goes through the process of questioning and examining what she formerly took for granted, the faith she was raised with no longer provides her with a "coherent orientation," and she realizes that it hasn't for some time. She recognizes a significant need for additional meaning and depth in her life, and decides to do something to address it.

Fowler refers to the importance of an ideological community that draws one into Stage 4. This community may be expressed by Clare through her college education, in her friend circles, and in the new ideas she was exposed to through therapy and her ongoing study. In some ways she shapes her new understandings of herself around these ideas, but she also offers pushback, especially toward her friend Jen's seeming jumble of spiritual beliefs. Throughout Clare's experiences on her migratory path, she is continually

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engaging in a process of increasing reliance on her own inner authority as opposed to an external authority. One example is her refusal to participate in John's grief support group. She respects his authority and appreciates his wisdom, but does not hesitate to decide for herself what will be best for her. (This may also be representative of Fowler's articulation of the negative potential at this stage for an "excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought…" (Fowler, 1995, p. 182)). Clare's "executive ego" continues to emerge as she makes decisions about practices and beliefs with which she feels comfortable. Her movement into Stage 4 indicates an authentic willingness to be responsible for her own beliefs. One could also argue that with the death of her mother, Clare is actually moving toward Stage 5 (Conjunctive Faith). Many of the actual SBNR study respondents appear to be firmly planted in Stage 5, with its openness to receiving truth from other religious traditions, and its "postcritical desire to resubmit to the initiative of the symbolic" (Fowler, 1995, pp. 187–188), deriving from Paul Ricoeur's "second naiveté" (Ricoeur, 1986). This may explain why the high numbers of Mercadante and Ammerman's study respondents who identify as SBNR tend to be middle-aged persons.

The insights Fowler offered about individual faith development in his study may provide a window into the potential influence of contemporary Western religious culture. Interestingly, he identifies a major *strength* of Stage 5 as the "rise of the ironic imagination," and a real *danger* as "paralyzing passivity…or…cynical withdrawal" (Fowler, 1995, p. 198). I suggest that this is where at least part of the cultural influence on the SBNR phenomenon reveals itself. Whether through an individual developmental

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process or driven by cultural realities, contemporary American society finds itself awash in irony, cynicism, and a perceived sense of helplessness about addressing social, environmental, and global issues—possibly the ironic imagination run amok. This is revealed in cultural, religious, and political discourse, social media and even entertainment. It seems that many have come to a general understanding that truth is fluid, multidimensional, and incomplete, but the engagement of these complexities may be just too overwhelming to approach, leading some to choose a cynical worldview and ironic interpretations of religious, political and social ideologies. This is an area for further exploration, and it is compelling to consider Fowler's work as documenting a cultural shift across adults, moving beyond an individual psychosocial view of human development to capturing a cultural shift in religious affiliation and meaning-making.

Community, Authority, and the SBNR Ethos

Returning to our themes of community and authority, there are both negative and positive potentialities in the SBNR ethos in relation to these. The mediated spirituality resources Clare and others are turning to, although plentiful, span a wide spectrum of credibility. One wonders if the resources used for developing inner authority really lead to profound and lasting personal transformation, or instead provide only a temporary sense of achievement and enlightenment, unsupported as they are by a tradition rooted in spiritual belief and praxis. Additionally, a therapeutic approach has the potential to trivialize spirituality by focusing on "intensified feelings" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 237) instead of connection to God or something beyond one's self. Another concern is the potential for contemporary "spirituality" to lead to what Thomas Beaudoin terms an

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"imperial psychology"; the creation of a consumption-based spirituality that ignores and prevents questions about our personal responsibility for the suffering "caused by our cultural practices;" one that attends only to our personal wellbeing; a spirituality that often fails to acknowledge our mutual interdependence. Understandings of spirituality can become self-oriented, resulting in a loss of awareness of the self as part of a larger entity or community.

The notion of a "sacred core" to which one can internally turn is powerful for Clare and her friends, however, this inner knowing is built by a self influenced by one's social location, life experiences and the surrounding culture, which will be different for each person. The lack of a shared conception of a "sacred core," seems likely to lead more toward isolation than unity. Of course, this inner knowing has always varied by individual; however, there has traditionally been the shared acknowledgement of a deity or source for one's knowing. We have noted the preponderance of white, middle-class people who identify as SBNR in the studies explored. Perhaps the relative affluence and reliable social supports of economic and socio-cultural privilege ground the self-confidence needed for this spiritual path.

What is Clare missing out on by not being a committed and long-term member of a community? Temporary and fluid communities can meet important needs, however, one question my study raises is whether these have the depth and accountability necessary for constructing what has long been seen as an authentic spiritual life. A solid community can provide a framework for effective social action both for individuals and groups, as well as "an alternative vision that challenges power structures, politics, and

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solely materialistic views of reality" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 245). The move toward a

"generic spirituality" (Mercadante, 2014, p. 244), where everything is accepted on the

spiritual path, also has potential problems. Rahner said it would be "deplorable if

everything were to disappear in a grey homogeneous spirituality" (Rahner, 1986, p. 20).

This leveling out of all religious and spiritual trajectories is reductionist and again,

contributes to the trivialization of the potential and historical reality of religion to effect

personal and cultural change.

Noting these important questions and concerns, positive elements emerge in the

changing reality as well. The turn to inner authority and more fluid community

involvement reflected in Clare's experience give voice to the discontent and existential

worry of our time, the continuing human need for meaning-making and spiritual

connection, as well as the strength to resist religious institutions where they have become

rigid, controlling and oppressive. A renewed focus and commitment to spiritual seeking

is positive, as is the challenge that new spiritual trajectories present to established

religious traditions in their quest for a living spirituality instead of a focus on doctrine

and dogma. Clare and her friends are enthusiastic about finding the sacred in unexpected

places, about wanting to experience awe and wonder, about being inclusive and

welcoming diversity, about tolerance for the other and about appreciation and care for

nature. They are also committed to self-improvement, both for their own good and for

what this enables them to offer the world. The self-knowledge they gain and the ongoing

development of their abilities to handle the complexities of life give them a sense of

agency and allow them to trust in their own wisdom. Their disappointment with the

people and structures of religious traditions, with their history of conflict on both personal and societal levels, suggest a desire for peace and compassion, which is sorely needed. The problems of the world are overwhelming for even the most traditionally religious people; Clare's personal development efforts and those of her SBNR counterparts, may show an effort to begin with something they can potentially change--themselves.

As sympathetic and affirming as Rahner has been to the yearnings and experiences of our SBNR conversation partners, he will not yield on the necessity for ecclesial authority and the community of the Church, despite encouraging "a courageous engagement with what is new, with what seems strange" (Rahner, 2004, p. 28). He draws on Pentecost to illustrate the foundational nature of experiencing God with others, suggesting that Pentecost was "not presumably an accidental local gathering of a number of individualistic mystics, but an experience of the Spirit on the part of a community…" (Rahner, 1986, p. 23). This is not to take away from the importance of an individual spirituality; however, Rahner believed the spirituality of the future would be increasingly communally-oriented because of the depth and richness this adds to one's spiritual experience. His belief in the presence of God as a living and ongoing influential force in the world also distinguishes his perspective from many of the SBNR respondents, for whom this is not a consideration.

Rahner questions the authority of the Church, but never the authority of God, believing that not all human-made laws are divinely inspired, even as he prays to find a way to obey which allows him to meet God in them (Rahner, 1995, p. 32). And, although

he challenges ecclesial authority to be less triumphalist than it has traditionally been, he still believes that the authority of the church will continue to be indispensable for a genuine spirituality, "…since, by not following this way, we shall eventually get no further than our own arbitrary opinions and the uncertainties of our own life selfishly caught up in itself" (Rahner, 1986, pp. 25–26).

In what ways do Tami Simon and Karl Rahner resonate with each other, and what are some of the fruits of comparing their motivation and approaches? We recall Simon's concern about the confusion inherent in changing times:

> We're in this time when the traditions are being asked to evolve and where these people who are finding themselves outside of a tradition are experiencing a wilderness and it's confusing. I sometimes worry if *Sounds True* is contributing to the confusion, and ask what can I do to turn this around? How can I help people sort through so they don't just become 'a little bit of this, a little bit of that,' and they don't even know what's going on any more? They've taken things, but they aren't actually giving any of the real investment that it takes, the training you would receive on a traditional path. How do we address that? What is *Sounds True's* responsibility in that? (Simon, 2015b)

Simon and Rahner may be unlikely conversation partners, but as we have seen, both are deeply concerned about the importance of human experience and the meaning-making process. They share a conviction that there is a transcendent process at work here, which is a powerful point of connection. Simon describes it as something that can be felt, a force that animates and directs one's life, something beyond words. Her insistence on not "wringing out the mystery" of life correlates directly with Rahner's belief that humanity's unquenchable desire for meaning is directly tied to the mystery of the existence of the transcendent. Simon offers the example of body-based practices such as yoga to help people connect with somatic experience. These practices share with Rahner's Ignatian

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Spiritual Exercises the goals of presence and awareness, as one imaginatively places one's self within a Gospel story, embodying the feelings, actions and choices of different characters. The attunement inherent in these varites of practices provide building blocks to self-awareness and the development of the inner life.

Simon acknowledges the depth of meaning inherent in calling a gathering a community, and dismisses its casual use. Although the formation of a community may be less structured than the type of Christian community Rahner advocates for, there is a shared sense of both the potential benefit and difficulty that the coming together of people for a spiritual purpose can provide. Simon's reference to Adya Shanti's warning not to give all of one's authority to any teacher resonates with Rahner's insistence that God's presence in human experience necessarily challenges the Church's claims to authority.

Simon, from her years of Buddhist formation and meditation practice, and Rahner, deeply embedded in Christianity, each come to an awareness and acknowledgement of mystery, which drives their work. Their conversation and imagined interaction in this dissertation serve as an example of how disparate entities can be brought together, find points of connection that may prove foundational, and continue to learn from each other despite significantly different worldviews.

Contributions of the Dialogue and Implications for Future Research

"Our own arbitrary opinions….our own life selfishly caught up in itself…" (Rahner, 1986, p. 26). Is Rahner's concern a fair depiction of the outcome of SBNR ethos and practice? Perhaps it captures a portion of this reality, however, it is not exhaustive. In

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my own work, the conversation between Rahner's traditional Christian and representative

post-secular spiritualities points to the following insights about contemporary

understandings of spiritual authority and community. The journeys of the affiliated and

non-affiliated emerge as less distinctive than anticipated in several ways. Consumer-

oriented spirituality is not only practiced by the spiritual but not religious; a wellbeing

approach to spirituality is a cultural phenomenon engaged in irrespective of religious

affiliation. Both groups engage authority, but in a different sense. Instead of an ordained

figure or an institution, a post-secular approach focuses on learning from the wisdom of

teachers and developing formative spiritual practices, which provide their own sense of

authority and accountability. Community, often temporary and fluid, can build around

these learnings and practices. People who listen to Brené Brown, for example, can form

an attachment to her voice and feel that they are part of a community of listeners. Her

message resonates with many people and creates a sense of truth and shared humanity.

Fluidity and movement have always existed within traditional religious communities, as

adherents continue to seek relevancy and meaning. Nuanced understandings of

community and authority are actually held by both systems of spirituality, in addition to a

valuing of ethical behavior.

People come with biases toward the labels "spiritual" and "religious," however,

the ways people live their values and beliefs are actually mosaics, defying prejudgment or

categorization. The unique contributions of this dissertation are the specific themes

addressed and analyzed within the qualitative studies of the spiritual but not religious.

These include authority (what is important to people, and to whom they are accountable)

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and community (what connects them with transcendence and with others), which open

doorways into the complex and often spiritually rich ways people are living their lives.

Other themes, including social location, the body, caregiving, political engagement,

dietary choices, belief, environmentalism, prayer, sexuality, theodicy, aging, and many

more elements of human living also reveal spiritual understandings, and further study

will continue to offer insight.

I set out to identify a space where post-secular spiritualities and traditional

spiritual expressions could engage with and learn from each other, challenging the

tendency to be in opposition to one another, specifically in the areas of community and

authority. Naming this space a migratory path, I suggested that it could potentially be a

site to navigate and hold some of the tensions, move past superficial assumptions, and

move toward a reintegration of religion and spirituality for their potential mutual

enrichment. I remain hopeful that this ongoing engagement will lead to new insights into

the interwoven reality of the religious and secular imaginations, enabling fresh and

compelling possibilities for integrating historical religious wisdom with contemporary

spiritual expressions for deeply fulfilling and generative living.

I am also aware of the inherent challenges this engagement presents to the field of

practical theology, and I see this as one of the contributions of my project. Our discipline,

for all of its valuing of human experience, creative methodologies and emphasis on

action, is grounded in a deeply normative Christian worldview and belief system.

Practical theology has been identified as the "…discipline most concerned with

mediating and integrating knowledge within theological education and between seminary,

congregation, and wider society" (Miller-McLemore, 2013, p. 6). It is concerned with

Christian ministerial formation and interdisciplinary interaction with the subjects of

systematic theology, Bible and history. It includes efforts toward the development of faith

communities, and discovering ways to integrate Christian faith in society in forms of

public theology. Contemporary scholarship recognizes this Western Christian focus and

acknowledges that "interreligious interchange is a growing edge for the discipline"

(Miller-McLemore, 2013, p. 15). Even some of the most recently published work in this

field, by some of its most important scholars, is centered on Christian faith and life (Bass,

Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Scharen, & Nieman, 2016). While the contributors to this

work focus on Christianity, they also issue a call

> …to make space for a kind of knowing that exists in the world as it is actually experienced by embodied human beings who are engaging in practices, living imaginatively before texts and traditions, aware of the limits of our knowing, and open to the beauty and the unknowing discovered in the presence of God. (Bass et al., 2016, p. 15)

For me, this quote illustrates the tension inherent in the field, and the opening that I am

pushing into, to move the work of practical theology beyond the confines of Christianity,

despite our own rootedness there as theologians. Our field is comprised of a diverse

membership that continues to push up against normativity in increasingly interesting

ways. Christian-centrism has been acknowledged by scholars in our field, including

Kathleen J. Grieder who reminds us that religious identities are "multifaceted…weighted

by histories, futures, meanings, commitments, joys, and suffering shaped by religious

multiplicity" (Grieder, 2014, p. 452), and she encourages the discipline to engage

religious pluralism. I join Grieder in her plea to offer the wisdom and experience of our

field to a wider audience, including the spiritual but not religious. I recognize the challenges to mutual dialogue between a field with a commitment to the tradition as authoritative and a population that does not recognize this authority as valid. Ganzevoort helps me approach this dialogue and theological reflection, however, I have encountered understandable resistance for the inclusion of the spiritual but not religious from those in our field whose focus includes faith development, discipleship and growth in church membership. As a Christian theologian, I am hopeful for continued growth in mutual respect; that those outside of our church doors will experience from us a reverence for their journeying, a reflection of our faith beliefs. As thoroughly relational beings, we need each other! It is only through companioning one another that we can hope for transformation, remaining open to God's ongoing revelation.

A common theme running through the expressions of spirituality from Rahner to the post-secular spiritualities embodied in the study respondents, is the importance of experience of the transcendent, a "fullness," of something larger than one's self, which also connects us to others. This may be what unites these disparate approaches to and beliefs about the "more" in life and beyond, and what will enable the conversation on the migratory path to continue; a conversation both illuminating and challenging.

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