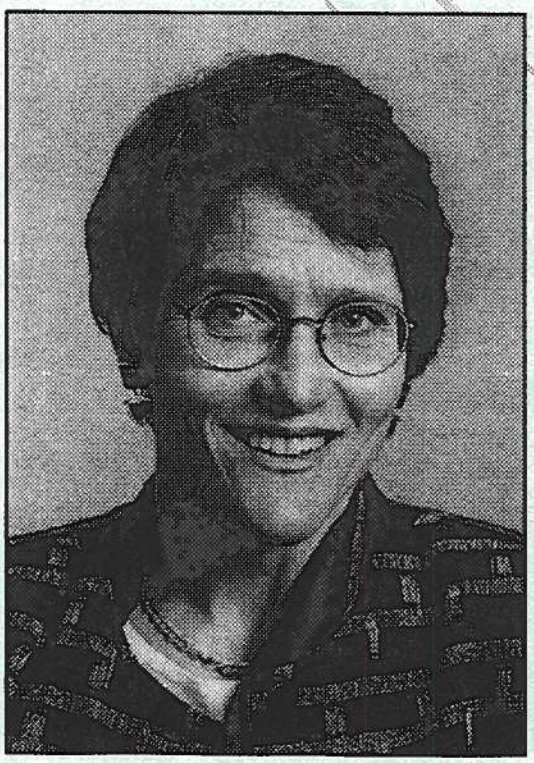
The 1998 Distinguished Faculty Lecture

Discerning the Spirits, Practicing the Faiths:

The End of the Millennium Quest for Spirituality



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GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture
18 November 1998

"DISCERNING THE SPIRITS, PRACTICING THE FAITHS"

Introductory Remarks:

We begin this lecture as voyeurs, that is, as people who look without being observed. To ensure symmetry and justice, we end by observing ourselves. First, I invite you to eavesdrop on a conversation. Second, I want to locate that conversation in a contemporary theological and sociological landscape. Third, I want to examine an important landmark in that landscape: the whole notion of practices. Finally, we conclude by observing ourselves: why all this attention to practices now? what does it say about who we are and where we are?

I. Eavesdropping unobserved.

First, let us be voyeurs. I invite you to eavesdrop on a conversation I had with a young woman who had attended a lecture I gave. The lecture is long forgotten; the conversation only remains, and it is a conversation you have probably had yourselves: "I really liked what you had to say: I just wish you didn't have to be so Lutheran about it all." I replied that some of my best insights came from "being so Lutheran about it all." It affords a unique point of view: from it I can see something, not everything certainly, but something. Moreover, I am stuck there; it is genetic.[1]

We talked further. She had been stuck there too -- past tense. She had been active in church groups until college, then discovered that this whole thing didn't do much for her anymore. She had searched about in other traditions, other faiths, and had finally assembled an eclectic, but for her meaningful mix of spiritual practices, which she engaged on a regular basis. "I'm not at all religious, but I <u>am</u> a very spiritual person. I meditate and pray, and I believe there is something divine in each person. I try to find that in myself and in others. It binds us all together and links us to the divine force in the universe." She considered herself a recovering Lutheran.

Stand back from all this for a moment: there is more in common between these two Lutherans, one stuck and one unstuck, than meets the eye. We were both searching for religious experience, and we had each found it in different places. Her spiritual regimen was

steady and disciplined: she meditated every morning for 45 minutes; she journalled at the end of every day; she participated in workshops and retreats, networking with the people she had met there. Meanwhile, I plodded along with the practices of my own tradition. At the hub were a central core of practices, the marks of the church: baptism, Eucharist, the office of the keys, ordination, prayer/praise/catechesis, the way of the cross or discipleship.[2] Moving out in concentric circles from this core are secondary practices, like marrying and burying, confirming, blessing a meal, remembering the dead, singing heartily and well.[3] Somewhere in the outer orbits of sub-practices lie the ancient traditions of drinking coffee and making casseroles and molded jello salads. For each of us these practices forged a way into the heart, the soil of religious experience.

We were not alone in this quest for religious experience, a religion that touches the heart. Eavesdrop on Augustine, who observed sixteen centuries ago: "Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee."(Conf. 1.1) Love forms identity and directs morality: our mores are shaped by our amores. The quest for religious experience is nothing new, but it is acute in this last gasp of the 20th Century.

And we weren't alone in our dis-ease, my recovering Lutheran and I. Our communities of faith manage well at furnishing people with doctrines: every good Lutheran knows about justification by grace through faith and the priesthood of all believers. Our communities of faith also gird people with social agendas: social statements on race, capital punishment, assisted dying, etc. My personal favorite is a statement entitled "Sex, Marriage, and the Family" -- as if that were the prescribed order.[4] But are our communities of faith any good at helping people experience God? Are they at all helpful in tutoring our affections? I wonder.... So I take this recovering Lutheran quite seriously.

This is the conversation we had. But we also need to eavesdrop on the conversation we did not have, the one I have been having with myself over the intervening months. There are two assumptions she makes that a lot of recovering churchfolk make. The first assumption goes like this: "I believe in the divine in me and in every human being." This is most certainly true. But it is only half true: there's a huge part of the not-so-divine in each of us. Call it original sin or pride or self-abnegation; this piece exists. Depending on how you are put together, the not-so-divine will screen out all criticism and provide only affirmation or it will screen out affirmation and provide only criticism. Sometimes it screens out everything. But the question is: How to acknowledge this balance of divine -- and not-so-divine -- especially if you are the only one listening for the divine in your life?

The second part of the conversation we did not have rotates around

my friend's comment that her childhood faith was not doing anything for her. And I wonder if the question: what will this do for me? is not somehow also only partly true. Religion does something for us, by doing something to us. Needs are paradoxical: on one level, we want them met; on another level, we want them transformed. Take Job on the dung heap -- here is someone whose faith is not doing much for him. He pleads for something he will recognize as vindication: it does not come. Finally, Job, simply asks to see God. When this happens, his needs are not met; they are transformed in a conversation from a whirlwind. This vindication is nothing Job could have conjured up on his own. Does religion really do something for us? I want to gather up the questions and try to locate these eavesdropped conversations.

II. Locating a conversation.

A recent book provides a map: Robert Wuthnow's After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s.[5] Wuthnow presents an engaging typology, which is also a chronology of spirituality in the U.S. since the 1950s. During these decades he distinguishes three types of spirituality: a spirituality of dwelling, a spirituality of seeking, and a spirituality of practices. He characterizes the 1950s as a decade of domesticity, which typifies solidly a spirituality of dwelling. This first form of spirituality attended to sacred spaces and habitation. Here place shaped identity, and this spirituality bestowed upon its believers a idealized sense of home -- even when the home scene deviated from "Leave It To Beaver."

The Sixties inaugurated a second type of spirituality: a spirituality of seeking. Commuting and consumerism increased; religion became more mobile as well. Given wheels and encouraged to shop around in their religious affiliation, people left the communities and mainstream churches of their youth. Mistrustful of institutions, authorities, and traditions, seekers sought to negotiate their own relationships to the sacred. This was a world populated by angels and mystical experiences: they appeared unbidden, anonymously, without judgment or difficult demands.

Yet seekers finally tired of this spiritual tourism. They missed discipline, depth, and something to sustain them between mountain-top spiritual experiences. Wuthnow announces the inauguration of a third type of spirituality, a spirituality of practices. Practices provide the discipline that a spirituality of seeking lacked and the depth that a spirituality of dwelling took for granted. This third type, a spirituality of practices, cultivates a relationship with the sacred through a committed use of regular spiritual disciplines, like prayer, meditation, journalling, and study of scripture. As one of those interviewed in Wuthnow's book observed: "You don't learn to play chess by thinking about it on

the way to work each day...." Prayer is the same way. No one develops a serious and sustaining relationship to the sacred without cultivating that relationship. That relationship, like any relationship, takes work; it demands a daily investment of time.

Where does this place my conversation partner and myself? We both yearn for religious experience and both have found a disciplined regimen of spiritual practices to satisfy that yearning. I come to practices from a spirituality of dwelling; my friend comes to practices from a spirituality of seeking. We both organize our lives around disciplined spiritual practices. As far as Wuthnow is concerned, we are both clearly located in the third sort of spirituality: a spirituality of practices.

But we need to engage in some discernment here. We need to discern the practices, just as one would discern the spirits. Look at my friend and I: our practice of the practices is radically different on three points.

*The first difference is the role of community. My recovering Lutheran conversation partner networks with lots of folks, but basically her array of practices reflects what she has found for the moment personally meaningful. My practices are deeply traditioned and highly corporate. At times, I have had to search hard for the meaning in them, but that search is always prodded by a community of people who frankly know more about this sometimes than I.

*A second difference lies in the practices themselves. My friend has chosen her practices out of number of different traditions and communities, but the organizing principle is her own sense of judgment. Of course, I operate out of a tradition with a narrow range of communal expressions, so one could say that the organizing principle for my practices is someone else's sense of judgment. But is that really true? That judgment has been tested and revised over time and by centuries of believers: it is a dynamic judgment. My friend has chosen her practices; mine have chosen me.

*Finally, eclecticism marks a lot of late 20th Century spiritual regimens. Can practices move from one tradition into another, and if so, how? How does Zen Buddhist meditation work outside its familiar context of meaning? Can a Presbyterian church build a sweat lodge to enhance its parishioners' religious experience? Do practices translate from one tradition to another without remainder?[6]

These questions push us to the third part of this lecture: What are practices? and what do they do to someone?

III. Defining practices.

I want to argue for an understanding of practices that is more situated than Wuthnow allows, because I believe that practices are by definition communal, traditioned, and prescriptive. I do not think that the notion of practices should embrace every bag of spiritual techniques or group activities. To that end, I offer a stipulative definition of practices, that is, a definition with fences, so that some things will be included and some things excluded. I do this without apology: every fruit cannot be an orange; every group activity or spiritual technique is not a practice. Practices are activities that compose a distinctive way of life, shaping the insiders and identifying them for outsiders.[7]

Cultural anthropologists and moral philosophers have long been familiar with the notion of practices. Cultural anthropologists investigate the worlds of meaning that practices create.[8] In an powerful essay, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," Rosaldo examines how a Pacific Island tribe deals with anger and grief, when its central practice is discontinued.[9] Moral philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre investigate the worlds of value that practices create.[10] Sissela Bok's large body of work treats contemporary cultural practices which we take for granted with an eye to the character of people they create: lying and truth-telling, or keeping and revealing secrets, or, most recently, watching simulated violence in the media.[11]

Theologians and ethicists show more recent interest in practices. Margaret Miles in Practicing Christianity argues that the religious self sustained by practices in a relationship with God allows release from a socialized self, burdened with often oppressive roles and rules.[12] The authors of Dorothy Bass' more recent volume, Practicing out Faith identify practices as activities that compose a way of life: they treat such activities as keeping Sabbath, hospitality, dying well, living simply, etc.[13] Nancey Murphy in a book Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition brings the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre into direct conversation with theological ethics.[14] These authors claim that a religion cannot be explained or understood without reference to its practices.

A story about Roman Catholic Archbishop Rembert Weakland illustrates this final point powerfully. He was approached by a would-be convert to Catholicism, and he told the young man: "Great! Go to mass every Sunday, and work in a soup kitchen every week. Come back and talk to me in six months." He does not recommend reading Rahner or the latest papal encyclicals; he tells the young man to engage in the central practices of the faith: mass and service. Religious practices afford entry into the heart of a faith.[15]

Practices both induct us into a tradition and function as the face

of that tradition in the world.[16] For example, my brother-in-law is a writer, and he became a writer by writing in a disciplined way on a daily basis, whether he felt particularly inspired on that day or not. Some days the words simply would not come, and after five hours of work, he had only a paragraph. Some days the paragraphs flowed. I am a Christian, and part of the reason is that I do the things Christians do: show up in church, study scripture, pray for my neighbors. These are often not mountain-top experiences -- in fact, they rarely are. More than doing something for me, as my recovering Lutheran friend demanded, engaging in these practices does something to me, not the least of which is induct me into a way of life called "Christian." Through practices a tradition enters the heart; through practices beliefs enter the body. Practices provide the soil for sustained religious experience.

That is the induction part. But religious practices function as the public face of that tradition in the civic realm. Campaigning for the civil rights of blacks in the 1950s, Martin Luther King did not try to speak a religious Esperanto that would mask the particularity of his own upbringing. No one would have remembered words like: "I have an idea, I'd kind of like to share with you...." But it was more than an "idea," it was a "dream," and behind that dream were words from the prophet Joel, for those who had ears to hear:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2: 28-29, NRSV)

Martin Luther King spoke in the very particular images and metaphors that his tradition gave him. He spoke in his mother tongue, and he had a religiously tutored first language to use. That language best expressed his deepest convictions, and that kind of depth translated.

In addition to inducting us into a tradition and functioning as the public face of that tradition in the world, religious practices have several salient characteristics. MacIntyre introduced the definition of practices most theologians and ethicists follow, and I want to amend that, isolating six characteristics of religious practices.[17]

1) Religious practices reflect and constitute a relationship with the sacred. At least the religion I am part of, Christianity, and its unique and somewhat peculiar expression Lutheranism, is not primarily about assenting to doctrine or honoring obligations -- though these certainly figure. It is primarily about being in a relationship. All the rest follows.

For all his great relational acuity, Augustine, the quintessential seeker, wonders in The Confessions how he could possibly have missed this. Surveying the twists and turns of a rich life, he discovered that at the very moments when he had been seeking to fasten himself to Great Ideas -- Truth, Beauty, and the Good -- he had already been found. He sought a "what" and was found by "Someone."

This relationship is not a private hot-line to the sacred: it contours all other relationships. Jesus restates the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures, but listen to its structure: "You shall love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt. 22:38-39) These exhortations depict a triadic relationship bound with love that embraces God, self, and community. When one leg of the triangle is shaky, the whole pyramid collapses.

Roberta Bondi discusses this triadic relationship in speaking of her daily practice of praying the Lord's Prayer. As a feminist she struggled with address to a "Father," but that finally was not the hardest part of the prayer. She continued to stumble over the word "our," because she could not readily embrace everyone that word included. In the midst of betrayal by a colleague and friend, she found herself praying daily "My Father -- and the Father of Jane Ann," and that repeated address effected a reconciliation she could not have choreographed on her own.[18]

This triad -- God, self, community -- structures religious practices. If the relationship to God is left out, practices become mere group activities, like coffee hour after church. Worse, they can lose their edge, domesticating the divine and creating the sacred in human form. If the relationship to self is erased, practices become exercises is self-abnegation and self-immolation. Self-sacrifice, a key virtue in many religious traditions, only works when there is a "self," integral and defined, to freely offer.[19] If the community evaporates, practices become experiments in spiritual solipsism. The presence of a community is absolutely essential to discern the spirits, to test the practices, and to expand our spiritual vision, lest that vision become occluded or grow myopic. I worry that many people like my recovering Lutheran -- not at all religious, but very spiritual -- deprive themselves of the challenge and comfort of community.

2) My second point follows from the first: practices tutor the emotions. Take a time-honored cultural practice or watching TV. Tune in during Saturday morning, kiddie-time television, and think about the emotions tutored here. A fourth-grade class in Portland took notes: there was a violent act every 60 seconds -- kick-boxing or punching, shooting or slashing.[20] What virtues and vices are encouraged in this? Fear, aggression, desensitization to

violence and desire for more.[21] Practices have the potential to transform or deform the emotions. Just as sinews connect bone to bone, emotions connect people one to another. They are the connective tissue of human society: they can build up or tear down -- that's why they need to be tutored.

Wuthnow observes that for all the Sixties' talk about the self -- self-expression, self- fulfilment, or "doing your own thing" -- "most Americans were ill-equipped to understand or appreciate what it might mean to explore the interior castle."[22] I wonder if today, for all the talk about feelings and emotions, we aren't equally ill-equipped to understand them. Practices tutor the emotions. For this reason, St. Benedict laid emphasis in his rule on the opus Dei, the daily office of prayer. Within the course of a week, monks would move through the entire psalter. Imagine the impact this had on the emotions. The psalmist finds room in a relationship with God for everything: rejoicing and despair, consolation and abandonment, judgment and mercy. It is a rich emotional palette, including perhaps some less favorite colors. Grafting oneself into the world of the psalms both evokes and tutors the emotions, which bind a community to God and to one another. This raises a question for my friend, the recovering Lutheran: Would she choose on her own such range?

3) Practices are activities that ritually address fundamental human needs. In so doing they engage the body, allowing the body to mentor the soul. The wisdom of practices challenges a more contemporary privileging of the intellect, which presumes that the mind directs the body. The wisdom of practices allows the body to mentor the soul and the heart as well.[23]

Think of the practices of a traditioned community and the needs behind them: the Lord's Supper or the Passover Seder responds to a need to eat; wakes and funerals responds to the need to grieve; grace at mealtime, the need to express thanks; baptism or bris, the need to belong and to mark those who belong.

But if practices meet basic human needs, they also redirect them. Remember the servant Job: he wants to see God, and God grants his request, but the impact re-wires everything. An encounter with the living God, whose works of creation have surrounded him in his misery, radically reorients Job's needs. Remember the recovering Lutheran: in wanting a spirituality that will meet her needs, is she escaping the possibility for transforming those needs entirely?

4) Practices are deeply traditioned: they are done together and over time; they presume community and history. We do not need to walk into Holy Week or Passover wondering "what shall we do this year?" The services follow a flexible pattern which believers have observed for centuries. Following in their footsteps, we join them

across time and space.

In the background of practices is Scripture; in their foreground is doctrine. Each is critical in terms of informing and norming practices. Scripture informs religious practices. Christians trace the practice of baptism back to the command of Jesus; scripture informs that practice.[24]

But if Scripture informs practices, doctrines norm them. Doctrines furnish a certain grammar of faith; practices show us how to speak. Practices allow us to live out a faith in word and deed. There is, I want to argue, a reflexive relationship between doctrines and practices. Without doctrines, practices are empty and aimless. We might do them by rote or routine, but we have a hard time figuring out what they are about. Without practices, however, doctrines are disembodied: we might give them lip service, but they have not entered the body of either the believer or the community.

Part of the terror and delight involved in teaching in an ecumenical and inter-faith consortium like the Graduate Theological Union lies in the wild and wonderful questions that arise across faith traditions. One question posed by a student from an a-creedal tradition arrested a history class in recent memory: "What does saying a creed do to you?" she asked. Those from creedal traditions strained to produce the right words and make the appropriate explanations, but only part of the answer can be put into words. The rest of it is embedded in a lifetime of saying the creed itself. Quite literally, practices embody doctrines; there is a unique and necessary balance between practices and doctrines.

So, Scripture is in the background of practices, informing them; doctrine is in the foreground of practices, norming them. The joint impact of doctrine and scripture often suggests revision of practices. Many Protestant churches found customary practices of ordination to be antithetical to their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. That coupled with Paul's clear argument in his letter to the Galatians that in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female...." (Gal. 3:23, NRSV) forced a re-examination of the deeply traditioned practice of ordaining only men as clergy.

Given the tight weave between scripture, doctrine, and practices, I would have to caution my recovering Lutheran friend from transferring practices from one tradition to another: Can a Christian or Jew use Zen meditation techniques? I worry about uprooting extract a practice from a context that both norms it, informs it, and gives it meaning. This seems the ultimate form of spiritual colonialism.[25]

Other questions arise. What then norms or informs the imported practice in its new setting? Practices wrenched from their contexts have little recourse either to direction or correction.

They become techniques.[26] Perhaps as techniques, they can be re-oriented in another universe of relationship with the divine. Perhaps the gravitational pull of that relationship could hold this imported technique in place, norming and directing it anew. There may be a place for these as secondary or tertiary practices, but they probably should not be part of the central core of one's spiritual discipline.[27]

5) Practices are good in themselves. They possess standards of excellence which are internal to the practice itself. There are ways of doing something well that come from the doing of it, not from a digital display of marks, or a coach's praise, or a teammate's clap on the back. You see it on the face of a skater who just completed a good program: he has skated well. Before he even hears the crowd's wild applause, long before judges calibrate their marks, his face registers jubilation: "I skated well."

Some in my own tradition may caution that I'm skating on the thin ice of "works' righteousness" here, but I think not. This phrase has been a Protestant excuse for not doing the hard work of formation for many years. Now that our students are going elsewhere for spiritual direction, we need to think long and hard about our knee-jerk reaction against formation and direction. If there weren't ways of preaching well, or worshiping well, or teaching well, we wouldn't be here. Even Luther counseled people on how to pray -- and pray well.[28] But finally the good of praying well is not Luther's or Benedict's seal of approval "Well-prayed!", but the goodness of prayer itself, which is communion with God and community.

Because practices foster internal goods; they are ends in themselves. There may be external goods that can be achieved, but they are secondary. Certainly, a trip to the national AAU championship finals excites our skater, but skating well is an end in itself. Similarly, prayer is an end in itself. When used as a means to an end, e.g., to get something accomplished or to achieve emotional equilibrium, it becomes a technique, not a practice.[29]

However, while distinguishing techniques from practices, I want to observe that techniques may become practices. In a well-worn example, Alasdair MacIntyre tells of teaching his nephew to play chess by plying the boy with candy. Initially, the boy played to amass candy. It functioned as a technique he used to get something else: candy, the external good. Gradually, however, the boy played not to win candy, but because the game itself captured his imagination and intellect. Chess had become a practice.

Perhaps the same thing happens with prayer. Sometimes we do it because we are desperate for something or about something. But the act of praying quite surprises us. Gradually the end we sought recedes in view of the relationship that embraces us. What we

sought out for ulterior motives becomes something we seek out because of its own unique goodness. This leads to sixth and final point.

6) Practices foster perception. Insight often does not alter behavior, but often altering one's behavior creates insight. Simone Weil writes of the effect of Zen Buddhist practices: "The idea behind Zen Buddhism: to perceive purely, without any admixture of reverie (like when I was seventeen)."[30] Practices afford eye exercises to correct vision, training the eyes on communion with God, which is finally not achieved as goal, but revealed as gift. Here the analogy to figure skating breaks down utterly. H. Richard Niebuhr expressed powerfully this meeting of creaturely yearning and divine grace: "We sought a good to love and were found by a good that loved us."[31]

All of the practices point toward connection with the sacred; all share this goal or telos of communion with God and participate in the grace of its bestowing. Given the gravitational pull of this communion, religious practices are united.[32] For example, in a course I taught one fall with Michael Aune entitled "Praise, Agency, and Action" each of the participants committed herself to a daily practice. One of the students chose prayer for the enemy. She readily confessed to using this prayer as a technique: she had ulterior motives and expected external goods: for example, insights, eased relationships, some measure of compassion.

But more powerful -- and utterly surprising! -- were the internal goods she had not anticipated. Perhaps the most unsettling was the way in which she began to see herself as an enemy of God, in the easy ability to generate ill will toward God's creatures. Other practices made a different kind of sense: for example, confession and absolution. She found herself stunned with the utter gratuity of the promise present in the Eucharist. Being deeply drawn into this practice of praying for my enemies, she found other practices made new and different sense. Aristotle spoke of the unity of the virtues; there is a unity of practices as well, because they display a fundamental telos of communion with God.

Let me sum up: practices are activities that compose a way of life and create a place for relationship with the sacred. They acknowledge and sustain that relationship; they tutor the emotions; they address fundamental human needs; they are deeply traditioned; they are goods in themselves; they foster perception. As I have elaborated them, they balance individual and community; they are less activities that we choose to do than they are activities that over time choose us; they reach deep into a tradition, rather than drawing widely from a number of different traditions.

IV. Locating ourselves: Why all this talk of practices now?

Why all this talk of practices now: are we disoriented? uncertain of a certain way of life? What does all this talk about practices say about us now in this place? I want briefly to wonder about the vectors of influence that force our attention on practices at this time.

1) First, there is a huge hunger for spirituality in this country at this end of the millennium. This hunger reflects the desire for relationship with the sacred, and the battle over naming God, male or female, Father or Mother, Lover or Friend, is highly instructive on this point: all the embattled names are personal, relational names. In an age of high therapeutic literacy, we all know that every relationship takes work. And we want to know what kind of "work" this relationship with God will take -- or at least put ourselves in a position where a relationship that has always been there can work on us. Practices afford a regimen of readying oneself for relationship with God and sustaining that relationship.

2) As Wuthnow has noted, there is a high dissatisfaction with a spirituality of seeking. A spirituality of seeking that once signalled a freedom to negotiate one's own relationship with the sacred now seems an unbearable burden. A spirituality of seeking that once capitalized on mountain-top religious experiences now needs to find paths through the valleys as well.

Spiritual practices like daily prayer, meditation, worship, and reading scripture help sustain a relationship in the everyday. The earth doesn't move all the time, but there is enormous comfort in knowing it's there. Practices endow ordinary time and familiar places with new meaning.

3) The body figures prominently in religious practices. Practices begin with the one fixed point on a spinning world: the body. There is a move toward spiritual discipline, particularly disciplines that involve the body and can be situated in the heart of everyday life. In the aforementioned course, "Praise, Action, and Agency," we watched how the requirement to pay attention quickly focused on bodily acts of breathing, touching, moving. Practices inscribe the body, perhaps the final site for a spirituality of dwelling.

4) There is undoubtedly a strain of anti-intellectualism in this renewed attention in practices. Practices seem somehow easier to manage. I worry about a possible prejudice against doctrines in this recent attention to practices, because doctrines norm and aim practices. But I do not want to ignore practices either, because

they enact doctrines. A reflexive relationship between doctrine and practice suggests that practices enact doctrines and that doctrines norm practices.[33] In a very real way, doctrines articulate the aforementioned standards of excellence for evaluating practices. Doctrine that is not enacted in practices is disembodied; practices that are not normed by doctrine are empty.

5) Finally, renewed attention in moral theology to character ethics and to narrative gives additional impetus to an interest in practices. Shifting away from a decisionism governed by reason and a focus on quandary ethics, many ethicists are reconsidering character and the role of tutored emotions or "virtuous passions" in the moral life.[34] This suggests reconsideration of the moral significance of the great grey area in which most of us wage our lives -- that is, when we are not resolving problems, confronting quandaries, dealing with issues. Practices provide a way of tutoring the emotions and developing character. The simple act of blessing food before a meal creates gratitude as a habit of mind and heart.

Conclusion

At the beginning of The Human Condition Hannah Arendt issues a challenge to "think what we are doing."[35] She writes at the threshold of the Space Age and the Consumer Society, and she wants people to pause, take stock, take nothing for granted. We stand at a different threshold, an age that is hungry for religious experience.

My recovering Lutheran friend would be spiritual, but not religious. There is a whole culture like that: hungry for spirituality, disdainful of organized religions, and wondering why the spiritual techniques they are stuffing into their lives finally do not satisfy. I want to suggest to my recovering friends of various stripes that the stuff for religious experience lies close at hand. It is embedded in the deeply traditioned and corporate practices. They may be done routinely, taken for granted, but they are dangerous acts, if we could just think what we are doing....

To members of this GTU community Arendt's challenge means something slightly different. As scholars and students of religion in a broader scholarly universe, we speak with and to the academy. We are well-trained in the language of meaning and morals: we can speak post-modern, cultural studies ("po-mo", "cult-stud"), the discourses of cultural anthropology, critical theory, and moral philosophy with the best of them.

But we also speak other languages. We are also custodians of the mother tongues of great religious traditions. We know them by

head; we also know them by heart. We know their doctrines and moral systems, but we also engage in their practices. That engagement and that alone allows us to speak passionately and persuasively to an age that is hungry for religious experience. What we say and write and practice in here at the GTU offers important nourishment to this deep hunger for religious experience, if we can just think what we are doing.[36]

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Endnotes:

1. H. Richard Niebuhr observed: "To be a Christian is simply part of my fate, as it is the fate of another to be a Muslim or a Jew." H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1963), 43.

2. Luther identified these as the "marks of the church." Cf. Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in Luther's Works: 41, 150 ff. While these are at the invariant core of practices for Lutherans, Reinhard Hutter suggests there may be other secondary practices circling this core, which exist as challenge and calling to the church in its public witness, e.g., the remembrance of saints and martyrs and an ongoing procedure of identifying exemplary lives and witnesses; the public stance of theology as ecclesial discourse; pacifism or a way of discerning just and unjust wars; a regular practice of church visitations; base Christian communities as a challenge for all Christians; mutual recognition and fellowship among all Christian communities; Christian life as a primary vocation, etc. These secondary practices alter as the church's witness changes. Cf. Reinhard Hutter, "The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit," Pro Ecclesia 3:3 (Summer, 1994), 352-357.

3. These are practices treated ably in Dorothy Bass (ed.), Practicing our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). Bass and her group consciously decided not to treat the sacraments as "practices. Thus, in view of the argument presented here, she and her authors did not illumine the core of the Christian faith.

4. "Sex, Marriage, and Family," Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America, adopted by the Fifth Biennial Convention, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 25-July 2, 1970. Text available in Christa R. Klein with Christian D. von Dehsen, Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 275-280.

5. Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

6. GTU doctoral student Erwin Barron related the example of the Presbyterian church. For a Roman Catholic statement on the use of non-Christian forms of meditation in Christian prayer, see the Doctrinal Congregation's statement "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," in Origins 19:30 (December 28, 1989), 492-498, and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 113-118. I thank my JSTB colleague James Bretzke, SJ for these references.

7. The definition is from an article by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," in Dorothy C. Bass (ed.), Practicing our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 6-8. Cf. the initiating discussion by Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175. Cf. Jeffrey Stout, Ethics After Babel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 266-292; Nancey Murphey, Brad J. Kallenberg & Mark Thiessen Nation, Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997); Allen Verhey, The Practices of Piety and the Practice of Medicine: Prayer, Scripture, and Medical Ethics (Grand Rapids: The Stob Lectures Endowment, Calvin College and Seminary, 1992).

8. Cf. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Karen McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

9. Renato Rosaldo, "Introduction: Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," in Rosaldo, Culture and Truth, 1-21.

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

11. Sissela Bok, Lying (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Secrets (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Mayhem (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998).

12. Margaret R. Miles, Practicing Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1988). Miles builds on Michel Foucault's definition of "practices" from his history of sexuality. Accordingly, her definition focuses on the relationship between self and the sacred. She does not consider the positive role of community in spiritual discernment; for her it is simply the source of negative ideas about how the self should be socialized.

13. Dorothy C. Bass (ed.), Practicing Our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). Bass and her authors treat the following practices: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives. She and her colleagues have developed their approach to practices quite differently than the approach taken here. They attend to practices that are "fundamental human practices that can be done Christianly." This approach distinguishes a core of practices that are distinctively Christian, then elaborating a secondary and tertiary circles of practices that correspond more closely to the practices Bass and her colleagues describe. Bass defends her approach as more Reformed on this point. "My colleagues and I took this tack because we wanted to highlight the character of what might be called liturgical or sacramental practices as gift; Baptism and Eucharist are only secondarily 'things Christian people do together in response to God's active presence.' The Sacraments disclose most fully God's hospitality to us, estranged though we were, and they commission us with the vocation of hospitality to others. But practices as I mean them have to do more with sanctification than with justification." Dorothy Bass, "Faith, Practices, and Works of Responsible Citizenship," Address at the Consultation of Teaching Theologians, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 21, 1998, p. 11.

14. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, & Mark Thiessen Nation, Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998). This book begins with a lucid elaboration of MacIntyre on the whole notion of practices, arguing that MacIntyre misses the theological and epistemological dimensions of practices. The authors continue by examining several core practices to some of the Christian traditions and conclude by bringing practices to bear on ethical issues: race, homosexuality, forgiveness, etc.

15. This insight undergirds the pedagogy of the Center for World Religions here in Berkeley. If you review the syllabus for their courses, you discover that instructors list books to be read, assignments to be written, but also require students to sustain one of the practices characteristic to the religion under study for the duration of a semester. How could one understand Chinese Buddhism without at least learning its distinctive practice?

16. Cf. Martha Ellen Stortz, "Practicing Christians," in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds.), The Promise of Lutheran Ethics (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 55-73,

17. MacIntyre defines practices as: "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity,

with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

18. Roberta Bondi, "Praying the Lord's Prayer: Truthfulness, Intercessory Prayer, and Formation in Love," in E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J. (eds.), Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 165.

19. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Liberty, Equality, and Sisterhood, trans. Ruth Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

20. Cf. Sissela Bok, Mayhem (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998), 140.

21. Bok, ibid., 11.

22. Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven, 88. He implies that Americans don't understand what interiority is all about and don't understand that interiority is only half the story.

23. Peter Brown writes about this phenomenon in the deserts of Egypt: "In the desert tradition, the body was allowed to become the discreet mentor of the proud soul. No longer was the ascetic formed, as had been the case in pagan circles, by the unceasing vigilance of his mind alone. The rhythms of the body and, with the body, his concrete social relations determined the life of the monk: his continued economic dependence on the settled world for food, the hard school of day-to-day collaboration with his fellow-ascetics in shared rhythms of labor, and mutual exhortation in the monasteries slowly changed his personality. The material conditions of the monk's life were held capable of altering the consciousness itself." Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 237. In a similar vein, Margaret Miles observes a "...secular privileging of intellectual and psychological understanding has led to a widespread assumption that change in behavior follows, rather than precedes, insight....In contrast to twentieth-century consensus, most historical people thought it obvious that insight follows change; changed behavior -- changed activities -- produce insight." Margaret R. Miles, Practicing Christianity, 89, 90.

24. Scripture may yield different interpretations. Augustine emphasized the forgiveness of sins and advised baptizing as soon after birth as possible for release from Adam's ancient sin. Radical reformer Balthasar Hubmaier emphasized admission into the community of fraternal and sororal admonition; therefore, he recommended reserving the practice until people were of an age to admonish and to be admonished. Each theologian highlights a key

element of the practice, but both appeal to Scripture. That appeal informs the practice.

25. The Doctrinal Congregation expresses concern for the integrity of Christian prayer when practices are incorporated into it from other traditions: e.g., Zen, Transcendental Meditation, yoga, etc. Here I raise a concern for the integrity of the imported practices. Wrenching them from their originating contexts for use in a Christian setting seems the ultimate form of spiritual imperialism. Cf. Doctrinal Congregation, "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," 495-496.

26. Elaborating Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of "practices," Craig Dykstra emphasizes the historicity of practices. "A practice cannot be abstracted from its past, because the past is embedded in the practice itself. To abstract the practice from its tradition is to reduce the practice to a group activity. An implication of this feature of practices is that a practice cannot be made up, created on the spot by an individual or even a group." Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education," in Nancey Murphy et al., Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition, 171.

27. The Doctrinal Congregation delineates three ways in which imported practices might be used: as a psychophysical preparation for truly Christian contemplation; as a technique for generating greater spiritual experience; and as a competing religious reality. Cf. Doctrinal Congregation, "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," III.12, 494. The statements makes some allowance for use of imported practices as psychophysical preparation, but advises caution against uncritical appropriation of these techniques into Christian prayer. Christian prayer and Zen meditation, for example, each have a very different telos, the former, an intimate relationship between the Creator and the creature; the latter, contemplation of an absolute without image of concepts. Cf. "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," VI.27-28, 496.

28. See his advice to his barber. Martin Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray, 1535" in Luther's Works: Vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 187-211.

29. Practices cultivate and are sustained by virtues; techniques require skills. Building a house is a technique, demanding many and various skills: masonry, carpentry, plumbing, etc. The workmanship can be judged by the quality of the house produced. Making a home, on the other home, is a practice which nurtures virtues of forgiveness, compassion, fidelity and is possessed of goods internal to the activity of home-making.Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175ff. A technique requires certain skills and is judged by the quality of the good produced, while a practice is a

good in itself and is judged by standards internal to it. If prayer is assessed in terms of what it produces, it is no longer a practice, but a technique. Matthew Lamb comments: "Unfortunately, much of the modern instrumentalist orientation has deformed christian asceticism, prayer, and piety... into techniques rather than the genuine practices they are meant to be." "Praxis," Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (eds.), The New Dictionary of Theology (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 787.

30. Quoted in Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (New York: Penguin Press, 1992), 247. A close reader of Weil, Iris Murdoch writes of the myopic effects of the "fat, relentless ego," observing drily that "self is such a dazzling object that if one looks there one may see nothing else." Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (New York: Routledge, 1970), 31. I thank GTU colleague Clare B. Fischer for introducing me to the works of Weil and for long and stimulating conversation on her import.

31. The horizon functions teleologically, but that telos is both sought and revealed, the meeting of creaturely aspiration (imago dei) and divine grace. H. Richard Niebuhr expresses this conjunction powerfully: "We sought a good to love and were found by a good that loved us." H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1941), 138.

32. This is analogous to a story Dorotheos of Gaza tells: "Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference....Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings....Let us assume for the sake of the analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God." The story is recounted in Roberta Bondi, To Love as God Loves (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 25.

33. Cf. Reinhard Hutter, "The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit," Pro Ecclesia 3:3 (Summer, 1994), 352-357.

34. Cf. Jean Porter, The Recovery of Virtue (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); G. Simon Harak, Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); Joseph Kotva, The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

35. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.

36. I want to thank Michael B. Aune and Richard Gula for their valuable comments on prior drafts of this piece. I also owe a great deal to my husband, William C. Spohn, with whom I share not only a life together -- but a lot of anecdotes, ideas, and stories. His work on Jesus and ethics, Go and Do Likewise (New York: Continuum, 1999), explores the interrelationship between virtue ethics, spiritual practices, and scripture. In other articles I explore the connection between practices, formation, and Lutheran ethics: "Practicing Christians," in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds.), The Promise of Lutheran Ethics (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 55-73; The Hein-Fry Lectures, Currents for Theology and Mission (forthcoming).

First, I want to thank you, Marty, for taking the time to sort through such a variety of literature in order to help us appreciate the importance of practicing the faith in the process of becoming disciples today. For too long we have severely restricted and over simplified what counts in ethics by limiting ourselves to processes of moral reasoning. You have helped us see that religious ethics is concerned with believing as much as it is with beliefs. There are experiential and affective components to the moral life as much as there is a rational part. Moreover, it is a happy coincidence that you have delivered your paper on practicing the faith in a chapel rather than in an academic auditorium. For here is where people gather for worship, one of our central religious practices. That we have experienced this place as a place of worship at the GTU makes it very fitting that we come here now to think about what we are doing when we do that.

I will respond to what you have done in three steps. First, I will state succinctly what I found to be your core argument. Secondly, I will sketch one of the insights that I will take with me from your work. Thirdly, I will raise one question which your work suggested to me so that we can think further about practicing the faith.

The Argument

First, then, your core argument. As I read it, your paper argues that Christian spirituality and morality must include participating in some distinctive practices of the tradition of the Christian faith. In order to understand the Christian way of life adequately, we must attend to the role religious practices play in informing the sort of character we ought to acquire for ourselves and for the community and the sort of actions that we ought to do by virtue of our commitment to God as disciples of Jesus.

The Insight

If I have captured your core argument correctly, then let me sketch one of the insights that I will take away from your development of that argument. This insight has to do with the relation of religious practices to formation in discipleship.

Being formed as disciples involves, first, our relationship with God in Jesus and through the Spirit alive in the church. Secondly, it involves enacting our commitment to God in ways that are expressive of that commitment. Here enters the relation of religious practices to formation.

Your work helps me to appreciate anew that religious practices are integral to formation because they take seriously the social nature of the self. The formation of character and the dynamics of our being social persons go hand in hand. No wonder, then, that formation personnel of a seminary or religious community always want to surround their candidates with people whose vision, values, and practices support the goal of the formation process. Religious practices are an integral part of the formation process because they embody the religious convictions, or doctrines, that connect us to a vision of life and to a world of meaning and value. Practices such as worship, witness, and works of mercy are especially formative moments because they hold together the relationships between God, self, and community. I appreciate your emphasis on keeping these three together, because these relationships are at the heart of formation.

Another dimension of the relation of religious practices to formation is that through the practice of enacting our faith our religious convictions enter the heart. The key medium here is the language of the body, word and gesture. Religious rituals use this

language. Rituals are structured and stylized sets of words and gestures that allow a large number of people, of different ages and eras, to express convictions and feelings that are central to their lives.

Of course, religious rituals do not always do this well. But, if it is true that practices are the way beliefs enter the heart through the body, then I am forced to re-think a place for rote participation in ritual practices. The familiar complaint of the adolescent who doesn't want to go to church is "I don't get anything out of it." I remember complaining so. Look where it got me! In our family, going to church on Sunday was a family practice--one of the ways we identified ourselves as practicing Catholics. I went because that is what our family did and not because I was personally committed to the meaning expressed by the ritual. The ritual for a long time remained a kind of stylized game of charades. Yet, that rote practice put me in a position of considering the meaning of the ritual later, when I was more receptive.

Your argument and my experience lead me to conclude that it can make good sense to insist on participating in religious practices even without knowing all about their meaning. The practices provide the experiential base for understanding the doctrine later. Without the practices, the doctrine has no way to enter the heart of the believer. Perhaps Archbishop Weakland appreciated the connection between practices and doctrine when he instructed the inquiring Catholic to go to mass every Sunday, to work in a soup kitchen every week, and then come back in six months to talk.

The Question

My question comes from trying to connect your account of practices to my experience in formation programs. My question is based on an empirical observation that can render this account dubious if not mistaken. My question is this, "How much personal and social transformation can we can really attribute to practicing the faith?"

My experience is that religious practices do not bring everyone who participates in them to see life differently, to change their values or purposes for behavior, to discover new meaning, or to reach a deeper insight. So when I read something like, "The simple act of blessing food before a meal creates gratitude as a habit of mind and heart," I want to qualify it by saying, "may create, sometimes" and "for some people." I don't want to claim too much for the transforming consequences of practicing the faith. Otherwise, we risk creating a theological version of "The Field of Dreams." Remember, the motivation to build the baseball field was "If you build it, they will come." The theological version would be, "If you practice your faith, you will be transformed." Is the link so automatic, so guaranteed?

Let me create a scenario for you that is not too far fetched. Imagine a Catholic hospital where in its chapel the medical staff celebrates baptisms, anointing of the sick, Sunday Eucharist, and the Holy Week triduum. Three floors above are some patients being maintained in a permanent vegetative state by gastrostomy tubes. An observer of this scenario who grasps something of the meaning of the practices of faith going on in the chapel would eventually be led to ask: Is it true that those who work here actually believe in life after death? To take seriously what we do in baptism, Eucharist, anointing, and the rituals of Holy Week can and ought to give us a very different stake in the way we care for the dying. It allows us to question attitudes that regard death as an enemy we must defeat, and it allows us to set limits on the treatments we provide. But other

influences from our personal experience and social worlds also shape our attitudes and way of life. Sometimes these other influences are more determining of our lives than our religious practices are.

In short, the connections between our religious practices and the way we live are complex, not simple. We practice our faith under the influence of the personal and social dimensions of experience. While I appreciate that religious practices can "in-form" who one is becoming, I am also aware that there are many other factors informing personal development as well. This is one of the frustrations of formation personnel. They can't control all the factors! While it is fair to say that practicing the faith **can and ought** to have a decisive influence on shaping the sort of person one is becoming, whether it actually does or not is subject to many other factors. When we try to link the transformation of attitudes and behaviors to religious practices, we need a judicious use of the subjunctive and modest claims of causality.

I believe that there is a way of doing the practice that opens us to their transforming power. We must bring an openness, a desire, and even some virtues to the practice if we are going to engage them well. I don't think they work automatically. In your example of the student who prayed for her enemies, I believe that she was able to engage that practice well because of the courage and humility she brought to the practice that enabled her to be open to the grace and power of the Spirit present to her as well. But now I am skating on thinner ice when I introduce grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, and maybe even a "works righteousness" through the virtues. I had better stop here and save all of that for someone else at another time. Thank you.

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