The Ambivalent Legacy of Practice in Faith Formational Literature

Abstract: This paper explores historical and ideological connections between the discourse of practice as a regularly-deployed metaphor for the work of Christian faith formation and the desire for the disciplined control of bodies enacted through colonizing forms of white Christianity. The appeal to practice in religious education and practical theology has relied heavily on a virtues discourse rooted in the philosophical work of Alisdair MacIntyre, and it often fails to account for the ways in which disciplined practice can transmit domination and oppression as easily as virtue and wisdom within the Christian tradition. After tracing the links between practice discourse and the potential maintenance of white normativity, this paper lifts alternative metaphors for the work of Christian faith formation imagined in recent works by Tran and Goto and seeks a more adequate ethic of interrogation of practice.

Introduction

This summer, I visited significant cultural sites of the Wind River Reservation in Riverton and Ft. Washakie, Wyoming. This reservation is a geographic neighbor to the retreat center that my spouse directs near Dubois, Wyoming. This retreat center sits on land that was sacred to the Sheepeater peoples, distant ancestors to some members of the Eastern Shoshone nation that inhabit Ft. Washakie. So this trip was part of a white Christian institution trying to be accountable to the intertwining of its heritage with the people from whom the land on which it is located was taken. The educator who helped interpret these sites, Fred Nichol, a member of the Shoshone nation, is the spouse of a member of the board of Trustees of the retreat center. As we visited St. Stephen’s Mission (originally Jesuit) and the St. Stephen’s Indian School on the grounds, Mr. Nichol talked about how he could speak some of the Shoshone language because of his own work on the reservation as a social worker and educator, but that he hadn’t grown up with the language. His father had been forbidden to learn the language because of his grandmother’s brutal treatment in Christian boarding schools when she spoke her mother tongue.

I have studied and taught about the legacy of Christian boarding schools and their participation in cultural genocide and the generational trauma that they created. What was startling to me, and shouldn’t have been, was the immediacy of the experience to my friend. It was his grandmother who experienced the brutality of Christian education firsthand, and he and his father experienced directly the erasure of culture and generational wisdom that these schools had wrought. This is not historical trauma, it is present trauma, wrought by Christian practices of education, in the case of Wind River Reservation, sponsored by the Episcopalian and Roman Catholic churches.

In Mr. Nichol’s story, the need to deal adequately with the ambivalence of Christian religious practice as transmitting both wisdom and destruction came home to me once again. I had actually
written very briefly about the different ways that practice is understood in practical theology several years ago: “Whereas virtue-based analyses of practice tend to focus on their value as a site of formative wisdom in the norms and virtues of a social tradition, political analysis of practices also focus on the manner in which everyday practices may often unknowingly replicate or reproduce unequal distributions of resources, differential valuing of persons and experiences, and oppressive ‘common sense’ understandings of the world.” The goal of this paper is to briefly trace these competing traditions of understanding “practice” in social science and philosophy and to advocate for an understanding of formational practice in white Western Christianity that better takes our history of domination seriously. This philosophical reflection is an attempt to draw our attention to how the ways in which we talk about practice in the fields of religious education and practical theology may erase the history of and continued potential for domination in Christian practice. Primarily, my concern is that the ways we talk about practice in our field softens the legacy of embodied control and links to dominating power that can be related to practice, perhaps as a part of a broader apologetic function of the two fields to support the work of the church. This recognition of the ambiguity of practice is particularly important for dominant culture Christians, whose historical heritage of practice includes both oppressive and virtuous practice linked through the pedagogical and formational practices of the church in colonizing settings. How might one theorize and engage in Christian formational practice without a sense of confidence that it is entirely beneficent, thereby unlearning white pedagogical habits of dominance?

Practice and the Transmission of Virtue

The timing of the contemporary turn to practice in mainline U. S. Protestantism aligns with the desire to recapture the moral and cultural influence and vitality of the white church in a time of great demographic change and institutional decline. The discourse of practice in faith formational literature truly picked up steam in the late 1990’s and the first decade of the 21st century. While in educational and management literature the idea of “best practices” became a strategy for capturing easily replicable insights that could be scaled-up as a way of improving efficacy, in the world of religious education, spiritual formation, and practical theology, the “turn to practice” involved a shift in strategies of formation to improve the vitality of the (primarily white mainline and emergent) church through voluntary, embodied commitment to reclaimed and often recontextualized traditional practices of the church.

2 The use of “white Western Christianity” throughout this paper is intentionally broad. I use this phrase to refer to the branches of Christianity that emerged in the modern era that are deeply informed by the practices of colonial expansion and conquest, the logic of white and Christian supremacy that emerged from the encounter with the peoples of the “new” world, and a struggle to convert, educate, and civilize the entire spectrum of peoples and cultures into its fold through a coordinated effort of embodied economic and cultural conquest. These inheritors would include all mainline and evangelical protestant and Catholic movements in the United States and their European forebears. I follow theologian and ethicist Jennifer Harvey in not capitalizing the word “white” to designate a noncritical form of racialized identity. While some movements within these churches have worked to understand the legacy of white supremacy birthed in their religious traditions, as a whole they have not reckoned with or embraced the undoing of this legacy, which often remains subterranean and therefore very powerful.
In the field of religious education, various approaches to faith formation have emerged as different theoretical conversation partners engaged scholars in the field. Developmental literature in psychology brought age-level developmentally appropriate standard curriculum to be delivered in the schooling model, anthropology brought a socialization model that involved rich participation in communities of faith, and hermeneutical theory and liberative pedagogy brought a shared praxis model. More recently a “revitalizing Christian practice” discourse as a model for faith formation emerged in conversation with neo-Aristotelian philosophies of practice. With generous funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., under the leadership of Craig Dykstra, and through collaborative scholarship organized by Dorothy Bass at the Valparaiso Institute, this understanding of Christianity as a way of life learned through intentional participation in historic practices of Christianity was articulated in several collaborative projects in practical theology and faith formation: Dorothy Bass, ed., Practicing Our Faith, Bass and Richter, eds. Way to Live, Bass and Dykstra, eds. For Life Abundant, and Volf and Bass, eds. Practicing Theology. Additionally, attention to practices was popularized and disseminated widely to historically mainline churches through the written work and speaking engagements of Diana Butler Bass and Brian McLaren. The idea of participating in intentional practice gained traction as a way of thinking about how people come to be more Christian in their lives in a time when the institutional church’s power to form faithful disciples through socialization was waning. As Gordon Mikoski and Kathleen Cahalan note, “Whether in more restricted (e.g., practices of hospitality) or more expansive notions of practice (e.g., the practice of discipleship), many practical theologians, in recent decades, have emphasized the importance of understanding and proposing specifically religious practices for individuals and communities.”

There are many theories for why this turn to practice in faith formational literature. One element is surely as a corrective to the overly cognitive and doctrinal understandings of faith that were a legacy of white western Protestantism, sometimes articulated in terms of bridging the theory/practice divide or in recognizing the “wisdom” or “intelligence” of practice and the value of phronesis. Emerging attention to ritual studies, feminist and womanist theology’s attention to embodiment, and other theological movements created a sense that there was more to the experience of faith than cognitive assent to doctrines. The perhaps overdone embrace of modernity and rationality in many historically white Protestant denominations left a sense of emotional disconnect and a dissatisfaction with the lack of a sense of transcendence and connection with mystery. While their Jewish and Roman Catholic counterparts held a deeper notion of what it meant to be “observant” of the religious practices of their traditions, this had been lost in mainline Protestantism, which was perceived to be part of the loss of the vitality of these communities. A route to revitalization for the white mainline church and individual faith lives might be through “an intentional and reflexive engagement with Christian tradition as embodied within the practices of faith, with the goal of knowing God.”

---
3 Since Diana Butler Bass and Dorothy Bass share a surname, I will refer to them respectively as Butler Bass and Bass throughout this article to maintain a distinction between them.
5 Cahalan and Mikoski, “Introduction”, Opening the Field, 2.
6 Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us, 305.
The hopeful trajectory of attention to practice was represented by the very popular book in US mainline circles by Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, in which she did ethnographic research with mainline congregations that were bucking the trend of decline, often doing so through renewed focus on practice: “All the congregations have found new vitality through an intentional and transformative engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices. Typically, they have rediscovered the riches of the Christian past and practice simple, but profound, things like discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation, and justice.” Butler Bass focuses on practices as “signposts to let us know that we are heading toward beauty, goodness, and truthfulness…the things they do together in community that form them in God’s love for the world.”

She names several key features that allow practices to function in a time when the authority of the church was waning: “Practices require commitment (they are ‘high demand’), but that commitment is typically internally and subjectively driven and not external or authoritarian.”

She notes that a focus on practice rather than doctrinal purity “…elevates the sense of intentionality throughout the congregation that leads to greater vitality and spiritual depth.”

In the study, the congregations Butler Bass spoke with focused on their engagement with intentional practices framed in a largely positive way: “The practices that predominated discussion were: worship, hospitality, discernment, theological reflection, healing, forming diverse communities, testimony, and contemplative devotional disciplines.” Like Pohl, she warns about naïve reclamation of history in the text: “Remixing the past by taking out the unpleasant bits is a dangerous thing” and expresses frustration with the evangelical version of America’s Christian identity as “ignoring the fact that American Christians committed wholesale evils like slavery, the genocide of native peoples, persecution of non-Protestants, racism, and violence against women and children.” However, she does not connect her advocacy of practice with the idea that these historic evils might have themselves been perpetuated through intentional Christian practice.

Another issue of this moment in history was the loss of cultural dominance of white Protestants in the US context. This sense of loss comes through in Butler Bass’s chapter “The Vanished Village.” Whereas once the white Protestant churches had had a trifecta of formation through their control of the culture in home, church, and school, the changes wrought by changes in immigration patterns, honoring of more diverse racial and religious groups, secularization in schools, and the deep cultural challenges of changing family structures to the historic “mainline” in the late 60’s and 70’s had begun to demonstrate the loss of cultural dominance to white Protestants. Authors in the 80’s and 90’s began to speak of post-Christendom, sometimes with

---

8 ibid, 11.
9 ibid, 306.
10 ibid
11 ibid
12 ibid, 31.
the hope that this change might loosen the ties between empire and church, but also with a clear sense of loss and concern for the need to double down on formation to stop the hemorrhaging of members in those Protestant communities. White Protestants could no longer assume that the vague cultural air was going to do the work of religious formation for them because they were losing their dominant position. And they began to take embodied practice seriously as a means of engaging that religious formation more effectively. This historical coincidence should raise questions about whether a desire to promote connection with God or a desire to regain cultural authority are the central motivating force of the turn to practice.

A primary philosophical understanding of religious practice draws on the neo-Aristotelian work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who understands practice as a communally-based, self-critiquing, transmitter of wisdom across generations. Don Richter claims, “The breakthrough book in this regard—that catalyzed rich conversation and a significant body of literature—was Alasdair MacIntyre’s _After Virtue._” Richter goes on to recount the definition of practice found in that work that has animated a great deal of research into Christian practices in the last two decades:

> By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which good 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.

For many working with the idea of practice in the fields of religious education and practical theology, this particular quote is the primary piece that they take from MacIntyre, often linking it to his explanation with playing sports and chess, and walking through the various elements necessary to make a practice a good practice. In full disclosure, I was a part of this movement to think about intentional, embodied practice in community rather than doctrinal instruction or communal socialization as a key model for education. In fact, Richter quotes my first book as an example of intentional practice in religious community that runs counter to social norms, in the case of that book, those practices embodied in consumer culture. In a time when socialization into the Christian faith seemed less possible in church communities because of decreasing rates of participation, raising the notion of intentional spiritual practice steeped in the tradition became an attractive way of talking about faith formation and re-enlivening congregations in the face of deep formation into other value systems.

Part of this understanding of practice is that engaging in it shapes the character of persons, largely in virtuous ways, with the potential to allow for more depth of engagement with God. Particularly in the literature about theological education, there is much talk of the importance of forming a _habitus_ as a part of doing practical theology. The version of _habitus_ that it forms is perhaps most clearly articulated by Edward Farley, when he talks about “theology as _habitus_” —

---

15 MacIntyre, _After Virtue_, 187.
16 Turpin, _Branded_. 
“…a disposition, power, and act of the soul itself. And some of the writers argued that the primary character of this disposition (habit) was wisdom. The genre of theology is, therefore, an existential, personal act and relation of the human self, namely, wisdom.\(^\text{17}\) In other places, Farley shorthands a definition of habitus as “a cognitively disposed posture that attends salvation, a knowledge of the self-disclosing God. As such, it is for the sake of God, but, specifically, for God’s appointed salvific end of the human being.\(^\text{18}\) Terry Veling uses a similar understanding of habitus, which he defines as “a disposition of the mind and heart from which our actions flow naturally, or, if you like, ‘according to the Spirit’ dwelling within us.”\(^\text{19}\) Habitus is a cultivated disposition of the heart and mind that attends to God’s presence habitually.

Richard Osmer points to key elements of MacIntyre that are attractive to those scholars who participate in what he calls “The Neo-Aristotelian Trajectory of Practical Theology”:

MacIntyre seeks to recover Aristotle’s theory of virtue and character, arguing that virtues are acquired through participation in the practices and moral vision of particular religious and moral communities. He is critical of modernity, for he believes it has eroded the capacity of such communities to shape the character of their members and fostered an individualistic, utilitarian moral outlook.\(^\text{20}\)

One can see how the shared frustration with MacIntyre over the erosion of communities capable of shaping the character of their members might resonate with leaders of white Western Christianity in a period where their churches are declining precipitously in membership and cultural prominence. The call for the renewal of communities of character is a key element of the work of virtue ethics, and this kind of thinking resonated with religious educators who recognized the role of formative communities in their own educational efforts.

The counter to this decline in the power of formative communities becomes imagined in terms of creating vibrant communities of practice that can shape habitus through serious engagement with religious practices, vibrant leaders through theological education focused on practices, and vibrant personal spirituality that leads to greater connection with God. For Dykstra, the formative power of practices ultimately rests in God’s beneficent action: “While human achievement is valued in the Christian story, it has a different place and meaning. The human task is not fundamentally mastery. It is the right use of gifts graciously bestowed by a loving God for the sake of the good that God intends—and ultimately assures (emphasis original).\(^\text{21}\)” Dykstra places great confidence in the involvement of God in religious practice, arguing that a gracious and loving God ultimately assures the good that God intends in practice will come to fruition. He grounds this belief in a powerful Christian theological claim about the goodness of God. Dykstra

\(^{17}\) Farley, Practicing Gospel, 16.
\(^{18}\) ibid, 19.
\(^{19}\) Veling, Practical Theology, 16. Christopher Brittain humorously challenges the notion of the importance of habitus in theological education as expressed by the book Educating Clergy by asking “Can A Theology Student Be an Evil Genius?”
\(^{21}\) Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 76.
envisions this as a check on the tendency toward human mastery and control in practice, and an assurance that God’s presence in the practice will put us on the right track.

My concern with framing religious practice in such an intentional and positive way, primarily as a source of virtue and connection with God that is backed up by the gracious intervention of God to ensure positive outcomes, is that this conceptually aligns the work of the white mainline churches as synonymous with religious practice that is grounded in the goodness of God. We are good people who offer good things that you should imitate. Christian practice has an ambivalent legacy. Scholars who have looked deeply into a particular historic practice in Christianity with the goal of reclaiming them for their positive formation of virtue, such as the practice of welcoming strangers as Christ described by Christine Pohl in her work on hospitality, discover this ambiguity of virtue and evil embedded within them. Pohl wisely indicates that we should be careful in how we talk about the “recovery” of practice: “A wholesale, indiscriminate recovery of any ancient practice is neither possible nor desirable. Certain aspects of the Christian tradition of hospitality are deeply disturbing. Only honest and serious attention to the failures, omissions, and tragedies in the story will allow us to make use of its strengths.” These failures, omissions, and tragedies are evident in other religious practices, like institutional secrecy about clergy sexual abuse in order to protect the holy image of clerical authority, which clearly have a harmful legacy that we would hesitate to claim as God’s gracious self-giving action made manifest.

The way that the virtues-based Christian practices discourse might deal with this concern about the ambivalent legacy of practice is to say that some practices occur in communal settings, linked to founding narratives, seeking standards of excellence, with an internally formed wisdom seeking salvation, and others do not. As Bass notes her and Dykstra’s normative criteria for what makes a particular practice Christian, “It has seemed to us, therefore, that to be called ‘Christian’ a practice must pursue a good beyond itself, responding to and embodying the self-giving dynamics of God’s own creating, redeeming, and sustaining grace.” But this distinction that some practices are wholly Christian and implicitly benevolent while others are not seems on shaky ground. The institutional practice of protecting clergy authority through moving abusive priests and pastors was a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” that sought a good beyond itself in maintaining the capacity for people to view clerical leaders in their ritual roles as largely holy and not pedophilic, for the good of the community who would be led by those priests as a representative of Christ. However, we know that this practice, though maintained for decades, did not contribute to the good of community but rather caused great harm to the survivors and families of the abuse of religious leaders. Yet, I think that we can give evidence to the enduring and coordinated state of this behavior as a Christian religious practice.

To be fair, Bass, like Pohl, was aware that practices could go awry. She notes, “Because communities engage in these practices forever imperfectly—faltering, forgetting, even falling into gross distortions—theological discernment, repentance, and renewal are necessary

---

dimensions of each practice and of the Christian life as a whole.24 And she recognized that in trying to give accounts of various practices, “it is easy to idealize Christian practices and the way of life they comprise, making them seem more smooth and coherent than they actually are in the midst of everyday conditions.25 She nevertheless argues that embracing such practices “humbly yet boldly” is how people are helped to make decisions about “what to do next within the actual complexities of contemporary society.26” Even more strongly, Bass and Dykstra conclude the book with the following endorsement of practices: “Like faithful ministry and discipleship, practical theology pursues the telos of a life-giving way of life in awareness that the means employed in doing so—the practices of faith, including the arts of ministry—are not merely tools. Rather, they are both the goal and the path of the Christian life.27

Practice and Symbolic Violence

Another important set of theories of practice less commonly deployed in practical theology and religious education comes from social philosophers who also understand practice as socially-based, institutionalized forms of behavior that inform the construction of selves through the formation of habitus. However, these understandings of practice are more concerned with how practice reiterates domination across generations through the disciplining of bodies (as in the work of Michel Foucault), forming habitus that aligns with those with the most capital (as in the work of Pierre Bourdieu), and the demand that one performs an embodied identity recognizable within the norms of the community (as in the work of Judith Butler). For the purposes of this paper and to provide a strong contrast to the ideas of MacIntyre, I will focus on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Where MacIntyre conceptualizes practice as passing down virtue through socially organized behavior, Bourdieu conceptualizes practice as maintaining structures of domination and forming people to serve the values of dominant culture even against their own best interests, often without their noticing or questioning it. Bourdieu understood people as active agents deeply formed within a particular sector of the world, what he calls not communities of practice but “social space”, “field” or “fields of power.28” Individuals become “…endowed with a practical sense, that is, an acquired system of preferences, of principles of vision and division (what is usually called taste), and also a system of durable cognitive structures (which are essentially the product of the internalization of objective structures) and of schemes of action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response. The habitus is this kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation—what is called in sport a ‘feel’ for the

---

25 ibid, 34.
26 ibid.
27 Bass and Dykstra, “In Anticipation,” in For Life Abundant, 358.
28 Bourdieu, Practical Reason, 32-33.
game…. The habitus works for people in the way other philosophies might talk about the conscience, but was what Bourdieu understood as a “...a socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world—a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.”

Bourdieu is deeply suspicious of the power relations in which practice is formed, and the way in which practice generally benefits those with more economic, social, political, or cultural capital, even referring to practice as “pedagogic violence” or “symbolic violence.” For Bourdieu, practice creates an internalized, embodied cooperation with those “…who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field.” He did not understand domination so much as direct physical coercion by those who are dominant. Rather, systemic violence occurred in a more structural and embedded way, “the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints.” The resulting effect of this socialization favors the cognitive, institutional, and economic structures of the more powerful by recruiting those with less power to see and understand the world through the lenses of the powerful through embodied practice, which serves to uphold the power of existing structures and institutions.

Bourdieu uses religious language to describe the dominant cultures that assert themselves through the logic of practice into the habitus of individuals. His word for the shared established order encoded in a person’s habitus is “doxa, an orthodoxy, a right, correct, dominant vision which has more often than not been imposed through struggles against competing visions.” Bourdieu asserts that “cognitive structures are not forms of consciousness but dispositions of the body” (emphasis original) that “belong to the order of belief” (emphasis original) that is neither conscious nor rational choice, “outside the channels of consciousness and calculation” as a form of “common sense.”

For Bourdieu, practice is linked with power, in particular the recruitment of bodies and selves into an orthodoxy that favors the values and aesthetics of the dominant group. In his reckoning, practice keeps nondominant bodies in line. Whereas within faith formational literature, religious practice is almost always cast as intentional, for Bourdieu, practice worked best when it did not draw attention to itself. The most powerful practices are those that we simply engage without conscious thought nor question. As religious educator Michael Warren interpreted him, “Much

---

29 ibid, 25.
30 Since many translations of Bourdieu do not italicize the word “habitus,” I am following that practice here. This also provides a convenient visual distinction between habitus in the virtues discourse of practice and habitus in the domination discourse of practice.
31 ibid, 81.
32 ibid, 121.
33 ibid, 34.
34 ibid
35 ibid, 56.
36 ibid, 54.
37 ibid, 55.
of Bourdieu’s social theory focuses, not on explicit norms guiding social behavior, but on the more subtle production of practices standing outside of rational calculation while entering deeply but unspokenly into behavior.\textsuperscript{38} Warren also picked up on Bourdieu’s “feel for the game” language, noting, “One does not think about the game reflexively; one just plays it.”\textsuperscript{39}

While both Michael Warren and Joyce Mercer drew on Bourdieu as part of their explorations of formation, both stop short of describing the practice of religious communities using Bourdieu. They tend to use Bourdieu to describe the formative power of the broader cultural milieu in which an alternative Christian formation or practice occurs as a form of resistance. Michael Warren, for example, insists that any discussion of Christian practice has to be imagined within the already existing conditions of material existence, and that practice in the local congregation is at best contesting those conditions while working within them. Mercer, like Warren, sees Bourdieu as helpful to describe the formation that already exists through participation in consumer culture: “In short, this method will lead me to examine the larger ‘habitus’ in which belief and practice take shape—that wider social and cultural shape within which people experience and learn a way of life.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Accounting for the Ambivalent Nature of Christian Practice}

In one sense, both understandings of practice contain common themes. They are drawing on similar Western traditions of formation, so that words like practice and habitus and a “feel for the game” are a part of both traditions of practice. As Bass describes practice, it could apply to either understanding of practice outlined above:

In spite of important differences among theories, certain features are common to many ways of understanding what a practice is, including our own. Practices are borne by social groups over time and are constantly negotiated in the midst of changing circumstances. As clusters of activities within which meaning and doing are inextricably interwoven, practices shape behavior while also fostering practice-specific knowledge, capacities, dispositions, and virtues. Those who participate in practices are formed in particular ways of thinking about and living in the world.\textsuperscript{41}

However, one of the two understandings of practice asks pointed questions about whom the practice benefits, notices sleight of hand in misrecognition that hides these power relationships, and links the embedded, preconscious feel for the game to practices of domination. The other links practice with a goodness that points beyond itself, is assisted by God to form persons, and is intentionally engaged as the “goal and the path of Christian life.” In religious education it is much more comfortable to talk about intentional formation of Christian habitus in communities of faith, but not so much about pedagogic violence, or the naked analysis of power, domination, and misrecognition that Bourdieu saw as intimately connected with the logic of practice,

\textsuperscript{38} Warren, \textit{At this Time, In this Place}, 107.
\textsuperscript{39} ibid
\textsuperscript{40} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 29.
\textsuperscript{41} Dorothy Bass, “Ways of Life Abundant” in \textit{For Life Abundant}, 29.
particularly religious practice. I am going a step further to argue that primarily framing practice as transmitting virtue is a way of disregarding potential alignment between Christian practice and the violence of dominant culture, downplaying the possible evils transmitted through Christian practice in the name of revitalizing the church.

How does this happen, even with those within the field who use theorists such as Bourdieu to understand religious practice? Christian Scharen is one of a few people who uses Bourdieu in his attempt to “develop a theory of ritual as a social practice, rooted in the habitus produced in communities of character and practice.” He is initially attentive to the ways in which practice is linked to categories of socially significant distinction: “Immediately one sees that Bourdieu is trying to describe the way in which particular social space—one’s social class, nationality, religious identity, gender, whatever—becomes to some extent merged with one’s embodied existence. Those social distinctions, those things that make one what one is and not another, Bourdieu describes as ‘bodily knowledge.’” Scharen is focused on how Bourdieu understands the body as a primary site of learning, citing Bourdieu to note the “…most serious social injunctions are addressed not to the intellect but to the body, treated as a ‘memory pad.’” I find it interesting that Bourdieu is talking about injunctions and enforcement, but in Scharen this language gets shifted to “apprenticeship in the community of practice,” more common to the virtues ethics discourse of Stanley Hauerwas. As Scharen notes, the language of “community of practice” is not used in Bourdieu. Scharen softens the language of Bourdieu, a theorist whose primary metaphor for education is “pedagogic violence,” and who thought that education served to maintain power across generations that served the dominant group. We might ask ourselves what it means to change this understanding of formation to “apprenticeship within a community of practice” erasing the bold analysis of power and the warnings about violence that are a part of Bourdieu’s understanding of habitus? Why do we avoid the parts of this understanding of practice that speak of the issues of control and the exercise of power that are a part of constructing habitus through embodied practice?

Bourdieu perhaps would call this the classic euphemistic language of the church, a kind of collective misrecognition that is required to maintain itself. In the field of practical theology, which intentionally understands itself in some cases as existing to build up the church, this misrecognition of the power involved in determining embodied practice may serve as a kind of habitual apologetic for the work of the church as always and entirely benevolent, linked to the goodness of God and different from other forms of practice in economic or political realms. Indeed, Bass and Dykstra talk about practical theology’s “special responsibility” to educate and form ministers: “The special responsibility of practical theology for teaching and research on the arts of ministry including preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, worship, evangelism, and leadership) imbue this field with a crucial role in a theological school’s service to church and

42 Scharen, Public Worship and Public Work, 65. Others who use Bourdieu quite well in the field of practical theology include Mary McClintock Fulkerson in Places of Redemption and Elaine Graham in Transforming Practice.

43 Scharen, Public Worship and Public Work, 60.

I have become suspicious of this “special function” of the field given the ways that the practice of the church has contributed to domination, particularly in the field of education. The softening of language, the focus on how religious practice contributes to the passing on of virtue rather than its ambivalent role in sharing wisdom and maintaining domination rests in this sense that our field’s job is to build up the church and not tear it down. Subtly, that critique of the potential violence and search for control in the church is passed off to non-white religious communities, to those who critique the church on the basis of gender or sexuality, to religious studies scholars, or to secular critics of the church. Practical theology implicitly aligns itself with maintaining the power of the church. For the purposes of this conference, I wonder if maintaining the virtue discourse of practice without attention to the domination and control of bodies through embedded knowledge and pre-rational consideration that is also a part of religious practice may align the discourse of religious practice with white normativity, even white supremacy.

One direction I thought about going with this paper was to suggest that the field abandon the idea of practice for a while. I turned to some wise colleagues in the field who are using different metaphors entirely to frame religious education. For example, Courtney Goto has taken up the metaphor of play as a primary metaphor for understanding religious education as a way to facilitate “revelatory experiencing.” In focusing on play, she draws attention to the aesthetic and improvisational dimensions of “leaning into God’s new creation,” focusing on “local” and “contextually sensitive” conditions that are “conducive to revelatory experiencing” rather than passing down the wisdom of the tradition. This metaphor seems highly promising in terms of pointing away from embodied formation as maintaining control that is a part of the metaphor of practice.

Mai-Ahn Le Tran explores an entirely different set of metaphors in her recent book, Reset the Heart. One is contained in the subtitle: “unlearning violence and relearning hope.” It seems to me that unlearning violence is so central to the work of white Western Christianity at this point in time that we should be listening deeply to her work, particularly its critique about the erasure of memory, organized forgetting, and a habitus of disimagination. Her metaphors of educability, redeemability, and communicability offer a new language for thinking about formation.

But, in the spirit of unlearning violence that is central to Tran’s work, I think that one of the things that is a part of my work is re-thinking practice and the way that it is not a neutral metaphor for the work of formation. It does not automatically create connection to God or enliven the church, even when it is deeply steeped in the Christian tradition. As a human practice that draws upon the mixed human experiences of being created in the image of God and being sinners who have fallen far short from that glory, we can never form a habitus that is only focused on salvation and not in danger of seeking to maintain our own power. Practice, even

---

45 Bass and Dykstra, “Introduction” to For Life Abundant, 7.
46 Goto, Grace of Playing, 5.
48 Tran, Reset the Heart, 57.
Christian religious practice, can also be a form of symbolic violence that recruits those who are dominated by a system to perceive the world through the lenses of the most powerful. Maybe especially Christian practice. As a White Western Christian, one who takes the legacy of my people’s participation in dominating forms of Christian practice seriously, I think taking a good hard look at the ambivalent nature of the practices that I advocate for, how they participate in domination and supremacist forms of seeing the world, and trying to unlearn those habitual forms of practice is critical, even when inviting others into the practice of faith. To insist on the virtue of Christian practice when historically retrieved carefully in the name of enlivening the church puts white dominant Christians in a potentially dangerous place where we are replicating a kind of good/bad binary with ourselves in the position of the good and others in need of replicating that good for the sake of God. This understanding flirts with a kind of reliance on purity as a sign of goodness…that we can’t engage in things that are tainted, because our own supremacist logic relies on others recognizing our purity to maintain authority.

Why would we give ourselves to practice at all if we hold it ambivalently? Ambivalence about our own certainty, the value of a practice, and humility about human wisdom is also a longstanding value of the Christian tradition. The demand for practice to be effective, to scale up, to save the church and stop the hemorrhaging of members is more of the capitalist side of “best practices,” and some of the literature on practice tends towards that conclusion, at least in its popular usage. Instead, we must enter practice with the sure knowledge that we may be learning dominance as well as virtue: “Recovering a rich and life-giving practice requires attention to good stories, wise mentors, and hard questions.” Hard questions that include whether or not this historic form of the church that has participated through its practices in cultural genocide, the alienation of humans from their given habitat, justification for slavery and the oppression of women and sexual minorities, creating a culture with great economic disparity, is something our scholarly efforts should be serving to maintain or enliven.

Conceiving practice as primarily a way of transmitting virtue backed by God’s action on our side pairs too well with the legacy of white supremacy and colonialism that is a part of white Western Christianity. The reality of embodied practice is that it is ambiguous or ambivalent, serving dominant cultural interests within the church as well as potentially creating a way of life that brings us closer to God. As Elaine Graham notes, transforming practice allows for the transformation of doxa, but we always engage practice with the awareness that we might be transmitting domination as well as virtue with it, despite strong theological claims to the contrary in the discourse of practice.

Works Cited


