

---

**A CONTEMPLATIVE EMPIRICISM:  
METHODOLOGICAL MUSINGS FOR AN ARTISANAL  
THEOLOGY IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP FORMATION**

LISA M. HESS

**Abstract:** This essay provides methodological reflections for the development of an artisanal theology for religious leadership studies. Artisanal theology is summarized as a praxis-theory-praxis approach to religious leadership formation, rooted in the storying practices of spiritual autobiography, contextual reasoning in case-studies, and writings of theological integration. Its signature is an expressive theological delight able to companion the suffering of self and others, and its method is introduced here as a contemplative empiricism. Terms are defined and the method is extrapolated from its roots in the non-correlational theology of Jean-Luc Marion. The essay concludes with the methodological operations of a contemplative empiricism for religious leadership, engaged in four concrete learning tasks beyond interpretation or understanding: joyful celebration that yet knows sorrow, contemplative wondering, gently held passionate conviction, and facing/embracing constructive conflict.

### **Introduction**

How do we identify theologically sound leadership in today's quickly changing institutional ecologies without on the one hand, solidifying outdated, overly modern presuppositions, or on the other hand, buckling under an irresponsible relativism unable to nurture spiritual hunger? This question guides the methodological musings here in an attempt to sketch the contours of what has been called an *artisanal* theology, suited to just such purposes for religious leadership studies.

*Lisa M. Hess is assistant professor of practical theology and contextual ministries at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio*