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## DOCENTS IN THE HOUSE OF WONDER: PASTORAL LEADERSHIP, SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION, AND THE SACRED OTHER

MICHAEL JINKINS

“The awareness of the ineffable is that with which our search must begin.”

- Abraham Heschel

### WHAT PEOPLE WANT

There are few things more irritating to me than a bad book that makes a good point. One such book, widely read among pastors, church leaders and scholars in recent years, is Donald Miller's *Reinventing American Protestantism*. Miller, a professor of religion at the University of Southern California, borrowing categories from marketing and pop sociology, argues for the viability of what he calls “new paradigm churches” such as Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard. It is tempting to critique the weaknesses of this book, and in my view there are many.<sup>1</sup> However, I want to focus on a positive feature of Miller's argument that makes it impossible simply to dismiss his book out of hand.

People in contemporary North American society, Miller writes, are yearning for a “transcendent experience of the sacred” which conveys “the self-transcending and life-changing core of all true religion.”<sup>2</sup> According to Miller, people want to participate in congregations that place the expectancy of a transforming experience of God at the heart of the community's life, worship and mission. I believe Miller is right about this.

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1 For instance: The author provides no substantive theological reflection on either the ecclesiology or the worship he touts, nor does he seem to understand the historical continuity of his so-called “new paradigm” churches with nineteenth-century revivalism. He does not seem to comprehend either the formal structures of “informal worship,” or the significance of the ministries of Sacrament and Word in the mediation of the sacred, to mention only a few critical failings of this study.

2 Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

His message, in my view, is both promising and threatening to those traditions of mainline Protestant Christianity that have emphasized Christian formation, but too often at the expense of spiritual transformation.<sup>3</sup> One need only survey American Church history, from the eighteenth century's controversies over the First Great Awakening to the breathtaking schism that occurred in Presbyterianism in the 1920s, to discern the typical anxieties among mainline Protestant churches in the face of potentially fellowship-disruptive influences like emotionalism and irrationalism sometimes associated with "transformational" or "conversion" experiences.<sup>4</sup> However, these same ecclesial traditions, in common with Christian churches throughout the world, also enshrine in their worship, theology *and* polity, a reverence for the transcendence, the

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3 The term "transformation" is particularly slippery in contemporary usage. For the purposes of this essay, I will stay close to the sense conveyed in two Pauline texts: II Corinthians 3:18 which reads, "Now we all, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." And: Romans 12:1-2, "I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." In both of these passages the word we translate into English in terms of "transformation" derives from the Greek : *metamorphomai* (the nominal form of which we have transliterated in English as "metamorphosis"). This term is used, as Arndt and Gingrich observe, in Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2 to speak of a visible, outward change in Jesus, "who took on the form of his heavenly glory and *was transfigured*." However, in both of the Pauline texts, the "change" or metamorphosis is "invisible to the physical eye." William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 513. Whatever it is, at least in Pauline literature, this metamorphosis does not represent merely a change in behaviors or habits, though both behaviors and habits and any number of other personal factors (e.g., emotions and affections) may be consequences of the transformation. This transformation is understood preeminently as a cognitive and spiritual change, that is, a change in persons which is related to their knowledge of and participation in God's Word and Spirit, a change grounded in God's own being and acting, and one which may resist or oppose certain other influences on the lives of persons. "Sokamatizesthe, [do not be conformed]" to this age, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Krister Stendahl comments that in Romans, chapter twelve, "there is, more than in any other passage in Paul that I know, an abundance of words for the mind, for thinking, for what we would call 'brain activities.'... 'Transformed in our minds' does not mean that we should not use our minds. They are renewed minds." K. Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 46.

4 Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746) remains the definitive source for an understanding of this event. However, the volume of

holiness, the freedom and sovereignty of God that effectively removes control of religious experience from the ecclesiastical realm. While the history of mainline Protestant denominations demonstrates a persistent fear of emotionalism and irrationalism, the reverence for the holy enshrined in these traditions conveys a respect for the possibility of genuine spiritual transformation in the lives of Christians that we forget or ignore at our own great peril.

Many people are coming to church today, Miller tells us, seeking a profound, life-changing encounter with God. If he is correct, what are the implications of his insight for pastors and congregations especially in mainline traditions? What might it mean for pastors and other congregational leaders to assume the task of ushering their congregants into such potentially transforming experiences through worship and preaching, counseling and congregational leadership? In order to address these questions, and to do so in a manner appropriate to faith traditions of mainline churches, I will begin by exploring one approach to thinking about pastoral ministry that has proven especially influential in North America for the past fifty years.

### PERSPECTIVES ON PASTORAL MINISTRY

Seward Hiltner mapped the terrain of pastoral ministry for a generation in his watershed text, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (1958). He described three “perspectives” on pastoral ministry. These perspectives are *communicating*, *organizing*, and *shepherding*. Whatever the “operations” of pastoral ministry, as Hiltner

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*Ecclesiastical Writings* edited by David Hall in Yale edition of “The Works of Jonathan Edwards” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) also provides crucial insights into the milieu surrounding this religious revival. See also: Amy Schrager Lang, “A Flood of Errors: Chauncy and Edwards in the Great Awakening,” in eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 160-173; and Michael Jinkins, “The ‘True Remedy’: Jonathan Edwards’ Soteriological Perspective as Observed in his Revival Treatises,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 48 (1995), No. 2, 185-209. Also note: Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) for a careful study of the Presbyterian schism in the early twentieth-century; and Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), for a sweeping new analysis of the various “spiritual revivals” that have periodically emerged in American society, and the political and social changes attending them.

called them, in which one is involved – and I would prefer to call these “operations” simply “practices of ministry” – each of these perspectives plays its distinctive role: coloring, shaping, qualifying, limiting and defining how pastors and other church leaders carry out their tasks.

The act of preaching, for example, may reflect any or all of these perspectives at any given time. Preaching typically is understood to reflect the perspective of “*communicating*” the claim of the Word of God on “the minds and hearts and lives of people.”<sup>5</sup> Preaching can also, however, reflect the perspective of “*shepherding*,” what Hiltner describes as the “readiness of the shepherd to be attentive” to hearers whenever “they need or wish tender and solicitous concern.”<sup>6</sup> Preaching may also reflect the perspective of “*organizing*,” that is, the concern of those responsible for congregational leadership to deepen and extend the social embodiment of the church as the “Body of Christ” through the ordering and administering of the church’s ministry.<sup>7</sup> What can be said of preaching can be said of any number of other practices of ministry, from the leadership of worship to the moderation of church boards, from teaching a confirmation class to providing pastoral counseling.

These three perspectives of communicating, organizing and shepherding are deeply inter-related. As we practice pastoral ministry, mindful of these three perspectives, we are able to discern the organic wholeness of ministry, in contrast to approaches that tend to fragment ministry into various technical or professional specializations. The *communication* of the gospel cannot be divorced from the *shepherding* of persons without doing real harm both to the gospel and to those who hear its message. The *leadership* of a congregation cannot be understood in isolation from the perspectives of *communicating* the gospel and *shepherding* persons, without losing the meaning of the church itself as people of God called to follow Jesus Christ. Hiltner, in fact, reframes as “perspectives,” a set of perennial concerns that runs throughout the history of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

5 Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 56.

6 Ibid., 19.

7 Ibid., 61.

8 From Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Gregory the Great to Richard

The pastor *communicates* the gospel, and the gospel makes its claim on the hearts of persons, whether the pastor teaches adults in a Bible study or engages in a long-range planning process with the congregation's official leadership. The pastor participates in *organizing*, *administrating* and *leading* the congregation whether s/he leads the people of God from the Lord's Table or from the moderator's chair of a church board. The pastor *shepherds* the flock and serves as a physician of the soul through all sorts of practices of ministry to the extent that these various practices contribute to the healing, health and wholeness of persons, individually and collectively.

Each of these perspectives has its biblical, theological and historical warrants; and each has its limitations. The classical *munus triplex* emphasized in certain Reformed theological traditions, describing the missional offices of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king, reflects these perspectives. Scholarly studies of the historical and contemporary models of pastoral ministry, such as David Bartlett's *Ministry in the New Testament*, Donald Messer's *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry*, and Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*, elaborate to one degree or another on this simple pattern.<sup>9</sup> Even the most

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Baxter, George Herbert, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Reinhold Niebuhr, these three perspectives, communicating /organizing/ shepherding, have historically informed, grounded and called into question the various practices of pastoral ministry.

- 9 David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989); Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, expanded edition 1987). Even relatively unbalanced attempts to define pastoral ministry, for example, as an executive office (such as is presented in the common misinterpretation of H. Richard Niebuhr's description of the pastor as "pastoral director") or as a kind of anti-executive office (as in Henri J. M. Nouwen's knowingly idealistic vision of church leadership") draw on the same perspectives for support and critique of their models. See: H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 76-81. Jackson Carroll observes that Niebuhr "attempted ... a re-theologizing of the minister's role. Like [Samuel] Blizzard, Niebuhr saw a considerable disjunction between what ministers were actually doing in congregations – their increasing managerial responsibilities as heads of growing suburban congregations – and the conception they had of their pastoral office. As a remedy, he proposed recovering the image of 'pastoral director' as a way of giving ministers a more adequate concept of their office. The image was drawn from the abbot's role in the Benedictine tradition as the one responsible for maintaining the community's health. Niebuhr believed that this image, normatively interpreted, would give pastors a theological conception of their office appropriate to the new context in which they worked. To be sure, they could continue to preach,

superficial and reductionistic attempts to redefine pastoral ministry as salesmanship, entrepreneurship, and customer service implicitly seek the authority conveyed in these perspectives; and it is ultimately in light of these perspectives that such *misunderstandings* of pastoral ministry must finally be judged as theologically inadequate.

What has sometimes been neglected, however, and, at times lost, in the shuffle of our conversations about the exercise of pastoral ministry and church leadership, is the radical (in the original sense of “radical,” as a *root* or *fundamental*) theological “perspective” of awe and reverence in the presence of the holy which lies beneath all three perspectives that Hiltner describes. Hiltner, himself, assumes the existence and cruciality of this underlying theological perspective. He alludes to it when he warns of the danger of “minimizing the difference between saving knowledge and other knowledge,” and thus winding up in pastoral ministry “with a humanism that has forgotten the awe and majesty and transcendence of God and the overwhelming and ultimate significance of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

Without reference to this radical perspective of divine encounter, we run the risk of losing altogether the spiritual significance of pastoral ministry, of pastoral care, of leadership, of our service to one another and the world, of our ministries of justice, and of our vital witness as disciples of Jesus Christ. Without reference to this fundamentally theological perspective, ministry inevitably collapses in upon itself as an earnest, but hopelessly self-referential and personally exhausting professionalism. Without explicit reference to this underlying perspective our justifiable fears of the excesses of emotionalism

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lead in worship, teach, and give pastoral care. But they would also understand that administrative tasks, far from being necessary evil to be endured, are essential for building and shaping a congregation's community and helping it engage in its mission of increasing the love of God and neighbor. Unfortunately, the normative meaning of Niebuhr's image was never fully understood or appreciated, and he was sharply criticized for proposing an a-theological, 'big-operator' view of ministry.” Jackson Carroll, “Facing the Giants: Pastoral Leadership in a Time of Change,” an address presented at a conference on “Resources for the Journey of Pastoral Ministry,” Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, February 27, 2002, 14-15.

- <sup>10</sup> Hiltner, *op cit.*, 58. This perspective is, to borrow a term from our German colleagues, the *Ursache* or, perhaps more accurately, the *Urperspektive* which is fundamental to and which has the power to reorient Hiltner's perspectives of communicating, organizing and shepherding through the various practices of pastoral ministry.

and irrationalism can all too easily be translated into institutional barriers to the very possibility of a transformation of persons by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What I propose is simply this: a recovery in pastoral ministry and church leadership of the radical perspective of awe in the presence of the holy, reverence in the face of the sacred other, and a recovery of the pastor's defining identity as, what I shall call, a docent in the house of wonder, that is, a humble guide in the mysteries of God, one who leads among and with and on behalf of the people of God modestly assisting them in becoming theologically conscious of that transcendence which is God's promise and God's threat to all we are, because this "transcendence" is not an abstract quality, but is none other than the transcendent God, other and *wholly* other, who is free and who has the unique power to judge and to grace and so to transform us.

Neither the church nor pastoral theology has ever disowned this radical theological *perspective* fundamental to the three *perspectives* of pastoral ministry described by Hiltner, but we have all too often ignored this underlying perspective, and have done so to the detriment of the church, the church's ministry, its mission and its leadership in our time. In a sense, I simply ask us to remember, as John Calvin said, "*in tota vita negotium cum Deo*," ("in all of life it is with God that we have our dealings").<sup>11</sup> The various social, psychological, cultural, political and linguistic negotiations in which we are inevitably involved as pastors and leaders of the church are rendered no less human in light of this realization, but they are given an eternal reference point, a perspective that renders them significant beyond all human possibilities.

What, then, would it mean for one's pastoral ministry, for one's leadership in the church, for one's preaching and presiding in worship, teaching, pastoral care and counseling to be soaked in a baptism of awe and reverence? I would argue that it would mean, at least in part, that one's life would be satu-

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<sup>11</sup> John T. McNeill, editor, *John Calvin on God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., second revised edition 1956), vii. McNeill comments further: "Throughout his writings Calvin stresses his unwavering belief that the high Sovereign of the universe is also intimately present in the world of mankind. He sees God's hand in all historical events, and never doubts that in our personal affairs and choices we have 'dealings with God' all the days of our life."

rated by an engagement with the holy, an encounter with God from which one can never fully recover. It would also mean that this engagement would shape one's whole ministry and leadership. Thus, let us consider the transforming engagement with the holy, and finally explore how this engagement might re-shape our ministry and leadership.

### ENCOUNTERING THE TRANSFORMING PRESENCE OF THE HOLY

There are, of course, many biblical examples of the human encounter with the holy, with God the transcendent immanent who alone transforms. The patriarchal narratives of Genesis, for example, relate the story of the Lord God coming to Abram in a vision (Genesis 15). As the sun goes down, a deep sleep comes over him, and "a deep terrifying darkness" descends upon him. Yahweh speaks to Abram, covenanting with him in the darkness, in the midst of smoke and fire. God makes of Abram, the pilgrim, Abraham, the patriarch.

Another narrative (Genesis 32) tells the mysterious story of Jacob wrestling through the night with a divine messenger who resists all of Jacob's attempts at control and manipulation. The one with whom Jacob wrestled gave him a new name that signaled a new character: "You shall no longer be called Jacob [the sharp operator, the trickster, the con-man], but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). Jacob, convinced that the one with whom he wrestled was none other than God, went limping on his way throughout the remainder of his life.

From the story of Moses' receiving the law on the Lord's mountain to the story of shattered Job's confrontation with God in the tempest, from the writings of awestruck psalmists to those of prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah, we are confronted repeatedly by transforming encounters with "the living God."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Rudolf Otto argues that this phrase, "the living God," differentiates the holy God of the Old Testament "from all mere 'world reason,' and becomes this ultimately non-rational essence, that eludes all philosophic treatment." Theologians and philosophers who later opposed the abstract deity of philosophy in the name of the "living God," and who

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<sup>12</sup> Note Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), particularly the chapter "Prayer in Prophetic Religion," 227-285.



rejected the static “windowless” monad of Rationalism, favoring instead the God of passion, love and wrath, have, Otto writes, “unwittingly been defending the non-rational core of the Biblical conception of God from all excessive rationalization.”<sup>13</sup> A decade after writing these words in his classic study, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto writes again: “As ‘living God’ Jahveh is entirely raised into the world of *ruach* [spirit], while His rivals are degraded into that of flesh and futility, and in the end are reduced to the status of sheer deceptive illusion.”<sup>14</sup>

Otto understands that the “rational and non-rational moment belong together in the idea of the Holy, and if we do not recognize this fact we are led into a wholly false irrationalism.”<sup>15</sup> Or, we might add, a wholly false *rationalism*. Thus, we do well to remember that when philosopher J. G. Hamann raged at the height of the Enlightenment against the reductionistic and stultifying rationalism of his age, arguing that God is not a mathematician, but a poet – and when he rejected Lessing’s “wide loathsome ditch” separating human history from the eternal – Hamann is speaking in the name of the “living God” of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had upturned his own life and his entire philosophical world in a crisis of spiritual transformation that forced him to reevaluate the nature of reality itself.<sup>16</sup>

The New Testament does not leave behind the “living God,” the holy, free, transcendent God, in the dust of a desert canyon on the Sinai Peninsula or amid the shaken foundations of the prophet’s temple. John the Baptist rages in the grip of the holy, and, it is in the name of the “living God” that John announces the coming of God’s kingdom. The “living God” of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Otto observes that as “heavenly Father” and “Lord” of the kingdom of heaven, God “is not less, but far more ‘holy,’ ‘numinous,’ mysterious, *q-dôsh*, (4≡H, *sacer*; and *sanctus* than His kingdom. He is all these in an absolute degree, and in this aspect of His nature He represents the sub-

13 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958/ first published 1923), 76-77.

14 Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays: A Supplement to 'The Idea of the Holy'*, Brian Lunn, tr. (London: Oxford University Press, 35.

15 Otto, *Ibid.*, vi.

16 See Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, Henry Hardy, editor (London: Pimlico Press, 2000), 280-312.

limation and the consummation of all that the old covenant had grasped by way of 'creature-consciousness,' 'holy awe,' and the life."<sup>17</sup>

This is nowhere more true than in the life of Jesus, and, in particular, during that night at Gethsemane when the Son of Man prayed for God to let the cup pass. The agony of Jesus, the agony of a "soul shaken to its depths," expressed as sweat falling to the ground like drops of blood: this is no ordinary fear of death, according to Otto. "No, there is more here than the fear of death; there is the awe of the creature before the *mysterium tremendum*, before the shuddering secret of the numen."<sup>18</sup>

This holy dread, this shuddering in the presence of the holy, this is the sense that filled Søren Kierkegaard with "fear and trembling," because this encounter brings us to the reason beyond rationality, the aesthetic claim beyond beauty, and the ethic beyond morality, into the realm of God alone.<sup>19</sup> The consequence of this encounter with the holy is a fierce transformation that passes through fire, through death. It is this experience of God, at least in part, which William James tries to describe psychologically in his chapter on "conversions," in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>20</sup> Otto, Kierkegaard and James help us to remember that God will not be limited by our creeds, but remains free to meet and to call whomever God wills on God's own terms. Nor is God's holiness to be construed as limiting God to a realm removed from this world. For the God of the Bible holiness is a secular phenomenon. God's holiness, as Karl Barth acknowledged, is not a feature of abstract transcendence, but of God's transcendent immanence.<sup>21</sup>

It should not surprise us, then, that some of the most compelling witnesses to the experience of the holy arise from

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<sup>17</sup> Otto, *The Holy*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, ed./trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: The Modern Library edition, 1994), 210-284.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, editors (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), I.1.322. Herein lies the crucial paradox of God's holiness and the secularity of God's world: The closer God draws to us, the more clearly we discern that we are creatures and that God alone is Creator.

the pages of literary fiction, some of which are not “religious” at all. E.M. Forster, in his first short story, “The Story of Panic,” describes the outrageous appearance of the pagan god, Pan, at a picnic of English gentlefolk on an Italian hillside, not long after the more sophisticated members of the party had declared that the Great Pan is dead.<sup>22</sup> Toni Morrison conveys a palpable sense of the presence of sacred other-ness in her novel, *Beloved*. “Death,” she writes, “is a skipped meal compared to this.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the most eloquent accounts of an encounter with the holy, in fact, is a fictional one that occurs in children’s literature, in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, in a chapter titled “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” in a passage that makes no pretensions to being Christian. Virtually everything Rudolf Otto takes as characteristic of the human encounter with the holy appears in this story.

The story begins at an anxious moment in the history of the Otter family. Young Portly, Mr. Otter’s beloved son, has been missing for days. There are fears that he is lost, or drowned. Otter sits up night after night at the crossing in the river where his child first learned to swim, hoping he will return there. Rat and Mole, upon learning the disturbing news are unable to sleep either. They set out in their boat in search of the missing child. They are on the river, the moon glancing off the water, the horizon glowing with the first hints of dawn, when Rat hears something, a song in the air, and just as suddenly silence again. “‘It’s gone!’ sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. ‘So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worthwhile but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. No! There it is again!’ Entranced, he was silent for a long space, spell-bound.”

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It is the immanence of the holy God that convinces us that there is between God and us an “infinite qualitative difference” [den unendlichen qualitativen Unterschied]. The phrase is generally remembered from the preface to the second edition of Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933). As Walter Lowe points out in *Theology and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), the phrase is derived from Kierkegaard (33).

<sup>22</sup> E.M. Forster, *Collected Short Stories* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947).

<sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988), 123. John Irving, Flannery O’Connor, Ron Hansen, Iris Murdoch, and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez, to mention only a few, have conjured up luminous and terrible, life-changing, life-rending encounters with the holy.

Rat tries to describe the music to Mole, who has not yet heard it, but it is impossible to describe. Rat is sure the music represents a call that both he and Mole must obey. Rat sits in silence, then the music begins again: “[T]ransported, trembling, he was possessed in all his senses by this new divine thing that caught up his helpless soul and swung and dandled it, a powerless but happy infant in a strong sustaining grasp.” Mole stops rowing. He too now suddenly hears the music. It breaks over him like a wave, catching him up and possessing him. He sees tears running down Rat’s cheeks. He bows his head and understands.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The story continues: “A wide half-circle of foam and glinting lights and shining shoulders of green water, the great weir closed the backwater from bank to bank, troubled all the quiet surface with twirling eddies and floating foam-streaks, and deadened all other sounds with its solemn and soothing rumble. In midmost of the stream, embraced in the weir’s shimmering arm-spread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder. Reserved, shy, but full of significance, it hid whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it till the hour should come, and, with the hour, those who were called and chosen.

Slowing, but with no doubt or hesitation whatever, and in something of a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken, tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvelous green, set round with Nature’s own orchard-trees – crab-apples, wild cherry, and sloe.

‘This the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,’ whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. ‘Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!’

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still here was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that, though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fullness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his

Rat and Mole follow the divine music to a holy place, and there come face to face with the god himself. Standing before him, they see the baby otter nestled asleep between his feet. Mole speaks:

“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

‘Afraid?’ murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. ‘Afraid! Of *Him*?’

O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O Mole, I am afraid!’

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.”

Everything that Otto describes, the blessed awesomeness of reverence as well as the awfulness of terror, is here. The rational and the non-rational, the fascination, the dread, the wonder, the benevolence, the joy and the longing like sorrow, all are here, mixed and mingled in the encounter with the holy, the boundless sacred.

C. S. Lewis evokes a similar response, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the children first hear of Aslan, the great Lion, the figure of Christ in the Chronicles of Narnia. Something, we are told, occurs in the consciousness of each child when she or he hears that name, Aslan, for the first time. “Perhaps,” the narrator comments, “it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don’t understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning – either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning, too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again.”<sup>25</sup>

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very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

‘Rat!’ he found breath to whisper, shaking. ‘Are you afraid?’

‘Afraid?’ murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love.

‘Afraid! Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O Mole, I am afraid!’

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.”

Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (London: Puffin Books edition, 1994), 120-125. Originally published in 1908.

25 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1950), 54.

Later, the children learn more about this Aslan, and it is then, upon learning that Aslan is “the great lion,” the king of all, that the children ask if he is safe. “Safe?” answers Mr. Beaver. “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”<sup>26</sup> However such a paradox may bring reason and unreason into conflict, whatever emotions this clash may entail, Otto explains, it remains the testimony of those who encounter the holy, and find there that “over-aboundingness (‘exuberance’) of the idea of God and the feeling of God” that leads St. Paul (and many others) to press beyond the boundaries of the received theological lexicon in speaking of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The house of the Lord is the house of wonder, of awe, of reverence, of the holy. We should remember this above all else, and not be surprised that they tied a rope around the leg of the high priest so they could at least retrieve his body should the presence of the Lord overcome and slay him.

People yearn for an experience of the transcendent, we are told; they want an “experience” that can transform them, and give their lives meaning and significance. If pastors and leaders of the church are to address this yearning with authenticity, with faith and with theological integrity, we must first attend to the holy. We must discover again in the history of the experiences of our communities of faith and in our own encounters with God that which is necessary to usher our people into a consciousness of the presence of the sacred other who alone transforms persons, who alone gives human life eternal significance. We cannot know, we cannot manipulate, we cannot control the results of any encounter with the living God. It is God who changes lives, not our experiences (not even our religious experiences). Emotions and affections are fleeting. Insights fade. Resolutions evaporate. If we try to manufacture experiences to transform the lives of our people, we give them a counterfeit coin of our own mint in place of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>27</sup> Otto, *The Holy*, 85. The old pagan priest, in another C.S. Lewis novel, *Till We Have Faces*, in a manner reminiscent of Otto, argues against the rationalism of the philosophers who were advising the king: “I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.” C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (London: Fount, 1978), 58.

real currency. And that is an idolatrous business, however we try to justify our actions. Changes in persons based on even the liveliest emotional experiences cannot be long sustained, but must be reinforced again and again by ever more titillating experiences (more smoke, bigger mirrors), the vapid worshipper descending into a spiral of spiritual pornography. Only the holy one transforms lives, and we must remember that this transformation is like a death beyond which lies only annihilation and resurrection.

*Mysterium tremendum*: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). But it is also a wondrous thing – death, but also life – and it can come upon us in so many ways, whether unexpected and unbeckoned, or long-desired at the close of a lifetime's quest. Otto, again, speaks of that experience of the holy which may "come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.... [I]t may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures."<sup>28</sup>

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28 Rudolf Otto, *The Holy*, 12-13. The proper sense of one's self in the presence of the holy, according to Friedrich Schleiermacher, can be termed an "immediate feeling," an "intuition," or "sense" of one's "ultimate dependence upon God." Schleiermacher makes apparent, in his explication of "God-consciousness," more than anywhere else, his continuity with the Calvinist tradition. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 3-31, 131-156. Whatever else one may say about Calvin's "knowledge of God," it is grounded in an "existential apprehension," that senses one's utter helplessness, one's creatureliness, in the presence of the holy. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.1., 35-36; see editorial footnotes. Otto's understanding of the human response to the sacred is consistent with both Calvin and Schleiermacher when he observes that in the presence of the holy we are overwhelmed by our "creature-consciousness," we are undone by that consciousness of ourselves in relationship to the holy, the numinous, who dismantes our pretensions, our pride and notions of independence and power. Otto, *The Holy*, 10-11.

Whatever else we may say about the experience of becoming conscious of ourselves in the presence of the holy, that it is both “daunting and fascinating,” that it transcends reason, entails dread and terror, that it is captivating and wonderful and awful, what must be clearly understood is that it is not our religious experience, but the holy one, who lays claim to us in the encounter. The holy seeks not to produce merely a new experience in us, but a new humanity in the image of Jesus Christ, who came to serve, not to be served.<sup>29</sup>

Jonathan Edwards described God in terms of the “*bonum formosum*,” the “beautiful good in itself.” He reminds us that the ultimate goal and highest good of Christian faith, ministry and worship *is God*, not something God does for us, not a benefit God gives us, but God alone.<sup>30</sup> Finding ourselves conscious of the presence of the holy, the sacred other, the being of Being, the life of Life, here alone we know the measure of ourselves and what we are created and called to be; we know ourselves judged and graced, dead and risen, we know ourselves as dwelling in the house of the Lord that encompasses all of God’s creation, which can never cease to be the house of wonder once we have encountered there the holy.

#### DOCENTS IN THE HOUSE OF WONDER

**Docent** *n.* 1 (in certain US and European universities and colleges) a member of the teaching staff immediately below professorial rank. 2. a person who acts as a guide in a museum, art gallery, or zoo. ORIGIN C19: via Ger. From L. *docent-*, *docere* ‘teach’.

– *Oxford Concise English Dictionary*

Abraham Heschel spoke of “a life compatible with the presence of God,” an existence conscious in each breath of the splendor and power and love of the Creator.<sup>31</sup> If we as pastors and church leaders were to engage in our practices of ministry as persons shaped by the radical perspective of divine

<sup>29</sup> Otto, *ibid.* 31-49.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, John E. Smith, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 263.

<sup>31</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 282-284.



encounter, what might this mean for the churches we lead? It is to this question I wish to turn finally and very briefly. And in order to address this question, I need to ask you to engage your imaginations to conjure with me a scene.

Imagine stepping into a cathedral. The cathedral stands on tree-lined cliffs overlooking a deep and swiftly moving stream where long ago bathed the hermit Saint Godric, on the banks of which Benedictine monks gathered their firewood, and today families stroll. At either end of the cathedral lie the partial remains of other saints in places of prayer and quiet rest. As you step into the cathedral you are blinded at first by the resolute gloom of the place. Having left on the other side of the heavy door the sun and sky, it takes a few moments to reorient yourself as your eyes dilate, becoming accustomed to another quality of light, that which streams in colored shafts through ancient stained glass windows. Making your way across the vast South aisle toward the nave, you are struck by the antiquity and immense scale of the cathedral. Columns a thousand years old stretch toward a ceiling more than a hundred feet above you. You feel small and insignificant as you walk along the central aisle toward the sound of a choir softly intoning the Psalter. Echoes return the length of the nave like the hint of an aroma of incense on a stirring of a draft of air.

Making your way up the long central aisle toward the choir, a robed man appears from the shadows and approaches you. He is a docent of this cathedral. He loves this holy place, and it is his mission to share his love with others who visit. He offers to walk with you. You have been here before. You have walked these aisles. You have looked upon these tombs, and carvings, and windows. You do not feel particularly in need of a guide, but you welcome the fellowship, so you invite him to join you.

As you walk together, the docent points out first this stone, then this seat in the choir. There, he points, sits the Bishop of Durham when the dean invites him to preside, though he cannot preside without the dean's invitation whether or not he is the bishop. There is the tomb of one of the greatest lords of Northumbria, though not one of the most pious. The docent points out the change in colors of building stone that indicates where the Norman Romanesque cathedral

ends and the later Gothic addition begins, each crease in the wall telling us that once a private chapel stood here, and there.

He points out the damage the “Presbyterians” did when Cromwell billeted his troops and their horses in the cathedral. He shows you the book of remembrance for coal miners, the names of every miner in the region who died in a cave-in or an explosion carefully inscribed.

Quietly pointing here, telling a story there, you become aware of layer upon layer of life and death, of praises and laments, held secret in the cathedral’s walls. You become aware also that the docent is telling you more than stories. He is telling you he has met the holy in this place. He is hinting that you can too. You remember your previous visit to this cathedral, guidebook in hand, a mere tourist in the midst of a majestic ecclesiastical pile. For all the beauty you saw then, it was a flat visit by comparison, at best an exercise in historical curiosity and romanticism. Today, the docent has brought you to the verge of something wholly different.

Together you make your way to a place behind and below the high altar, lit only by candles, a low tomb of plain, dark marble, the name of the saint carved deeply in its surface. You sense that you have reached the climax of this intimate tour. You sense also that you have been steered here on purpose by cunning and skill. The docent tells you matter-of-factly what it means to him that Christians worship here, and have worshipped here for fourteen hundred years. He speaks of the saint whose bones lie at your feet as though of a father or a mother he loves and with whom he still speaks each day. He tells you of wonders others have experienced praying on these very stones. He tells you why he prays here. His words, simple and humble, touch you. And as the docent slips away, you find yourself bowing also to pray.

Rudolf Otto says of the consciousness of the holy, that it cannot be “taught,” only “awakened.”<sup>32</sup> It is this we need to reclaim at the heart of pastoral ministry and church leadership. Hidden within every practice of ministry and each gathering of the community of faith, despite the stated purpose, there is the possibility of encounter with the sacred other, the living God, who alone transforms humanity. The docent is in the

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<sup>32</sup> Otto, *op cit.*, 60.

midst of it all, communicating, shepherding, and leading. The docent points here and there, sets velvet ropes around the mysteries in our midst.<sup>33</sup>

When the docent is unskilled and ignorant, lacking in experience and wisdom, blithely unaware of the God among us, we are unlikely to notice much of the sacred. Church administration, in such cases, remains bone dry and bloody annoying. With the unskilled docent we are not likely to perceive church administration as the equipping of God's saints for the sake of God's mission, only paperwork, endless lists of jobs to be done and positions to be filled. Preaching, in the hands of an unskilled docent, falls into the dull repetition of truisms and pre-packaged clichés, or into the vain business of self-promotion. Shepherding, then, becomes merely people-pleasing with no concept that it is to the pleasure of God we are called. However pleased people may be with us they will not, in the end, thank us if we give them a mess of pottage when they come to church, as Karl Barth once said, with "a passionate longing to lay hold of [the God] who overcomes the world because he is its Creator and Redeemer, its beginning and end and Lord."<sup>34</sup>

The pastor like the prime suspect in a murder mystery has the means, the motive and the opportunity to commit a wondrous ministry, to point out to us the signs of God's presence, to take us to that place where the holy is found, to teach us how to live with reverence and serve with awe in the house of the Lord. The pastor has this calling above all others to be an usher at the threshold of the holy. The pastor has this role – sacred, irreducible, and foolish – to deliver the people into a consciousness of the presence of God, in which they will

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most compelling recent descriptions of the vocation of the docent is Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), a reflection on his three years pastoral ministry in a Midwestern Lutheran congregation. He writes: "Our journey to Cana [his parish] was Pilgrim's journey, if not to the Heavenly City, at least toward the fullest expression of the life that had been given us. 'The glory of God is humanity fully alive,' St. Irenaeus said. If he was right, I saw the glory of God many times where I least expected it.... The only thing that made us different from any other kinship group or society was the mysterious presence of Jesus in the community. We were his body, which is not a metaphor. The ordinary world really is capable of hosting the infinite Being. As I searched the face of my congregation on my last Sunday, I felt the theological point was proved" (232).

<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, tr. Douglas Horton (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978 edition, originally published 1928), 108-109.

know themselves to be creatures created for God's own ends. This is, of course, an impossible task. But a competent docent in the house of wonder helps to set the conditions for the impossible to occur. In setting these conditions the docent denies their efficacy, protesting that God cannot be made known by human efforts, that God is free, unfettered, and unbounded, and that this free God wills to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ using all sorts and conditions of instruments, even pastors.

Many people, we are told, are coming to church today longing for a transforming experience with the transcendent God. How disappointed they must be to find just more of the same vapid entertainment and marketing, nationalistic jingoism and base self- and party-interest within the church they hoped they had left outside its doors. A holy God demands more, and so does a holy people.