
A HERMENEUTIC OF APPRECIATION: CULTIVATING ENCOUNTERS OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE WITHIN CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

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Abstract

In this article, we note the decline of membership within mainline Protestant denominations, and we propose that this decline—commonly experienced as a crisis—can also serve as a fertile ground for new opportunities for reflection and spiritual formation. We examine ways in which religious leaders can intentionally engage anyone seeking to deepen understandings of their experiences with God. We are especially interested in discussing Raimon Panikkar’s and Hans Georg Gadamer’s theological and philosophical frameworks as a means of encouraging religious leaders to engage the “spiritual but not religious” population in experiential and participatory ways rather than didactically and authoritatively. To illustrate such encounters, we also reflect on “The Obedire Project: A Resource for Contemplative Evangelism” as a case study of one reframing of ministry and parish spiritual formation.

Introduction

In the fall of 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released an updated study on American participation in Christianity.¹ Given the findings, the study received significant press coverage. As senior researcher Gregory Smith said, “We really haven’t seen

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¹ Cary Funk and Greg Smith, “Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, www.pewforum.org (accessed October 2012).

anything like this before. Even when the baby boomers came of age in the early '70s, they were half as likely to be unaffiliated as compared with young people today.” Over the past forty years, the Protestant church has declined from claiming two-thirds of the American population to under half in 2012. Furthermore, this decline is not just among liberal, mainline Protestant denominations, but it is also among conservative evangelicals. What we have seen, according to Smith, is that instead of switching churches, people are simply not identifying with any religion. Nearly one in five Americans says they are atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular,” or “Nones,” as they are being labeled.² More alarming is that this change is currently accelerating, with the rate of change increasing about fourfold. Forty years ago, 7 percent of American adults said they had no religious affiliation. Then, five years ago, this statistic grew to 15 percent (about a quarter percent change annually). In the summer of 2012, when the current study was conducted, it was 20 percent (a full one percent change annually). The Nones are the second largest grouping in the survey, just below Roman Catholics, who make up about 22 percent of the population.

So what is going on? The report offers four theories to explain these changes. The first theory is “Political Backlash,” arguing that young adults “have turned away from organized religion because they perceive it as deeply entangled with conservative politics and do not want to have any association with it.”³ The second theory is “Delays in Marriage,” where adults under 30 who are married are more likely to have a religious affiliation than are unmarried people.⁴ The third theory is “Broad Social Disengagement,” or what Putnam calls “bowling alone.”

² Funk and Smith, 9.

³ Funk and Smith, 29. The report cites Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review*, vol 67 (2002), 165-190; and Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 120-121.

⁴ Funk and Smith, 30.

This theory points to the trend away from social and community involvement, where “religiously unaffiliated Americans are less inclined than Americans as a whole to feel that it is very important to belong to ‘a community of people who share your values and beliefs.’”⁵ The final theory explored by the Pew study is “Secularization,” where the United States is following the trend seen in many economically developed countries, like Australia, Canada, and some in Europe.⁶ However, the Pew report found that even among Nones, few qualified as purely secular. Interestingly, two-thirds say they still believe in God, and one-fifth say they pray every day. It is for this majority of Nones, who are seemingly available to God, that we believe a more experiential engagement about faith is fitting.

Undoubtedly, the complexity surrounding the U.S. decline in church affiliation has many interrelated variables. For the purpose of this article, the Pew study offers the basic context for the Nones whom we believe would benefit from clergy who adopt a hermeneutic of appreciation.⁷ This hermeneutic of appreciation is an intentional way to foster encounters among people rather

⁵ Funk and Smith, 31.

⁶ The Pew study cites for this argument Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), who argue that “Societies where people’s daily lives are shaped by the threat of poverty, disease and premature death remain as religious today as centuries earlier. These same societies are also experiencing rapid population growth. In rich nations, by contrast, the evidence demonstrates that secularization has been proceeding since at least the mid-twentieth century (and probably earlier) – but at the same time fertility rates have fallen sharply, so that in recent years population growth has stagnated and their total population is starting to shrink. The result of these combined trends is that *rich societies are becoming more secular but the world as a whole is becoming more religious*,” p. 216-217.

⁷ While we specifically note “clergy” here, we also recognize that there are additional external authorities and doctrinal traditions and institutional structures that can demand an external validation in the model of “clergy expert.” We also recognize that there are many religious leaders who are not clergy but who would equally benefit from a hermeneutic of appreciation.

than ultimately relying on the clergy to *validate* divine encounters (as experts about God).

We propose that religious leaders cultivate spaces that embrace multiple viewpoints—including those who hold deep questions and suspicion. Such a cultivation of encounters, exercises in a risk-filled faithfulness, enriches the entire spiritual community and empowers individuals to further their discipleship and spiritual growth. We have found two twentieth-century thinkers to be helpful in providing a theological image: Raimon Panikkar’s “windows,” and a philosophical image, Hans Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.”

Raimon Panikkar

Raimon Panikkar died in 2010 at the age of 91. He was a renowned theologian whose father was an Indian Hindu and whose mother was Catalan Catholic. Thus, he grew up steeped in two markedly different faith perspectives, each with its own language to describe God and the way humans and creation encounter God—and, significantly, are encountered by *it*. His writings show that he wrestled his entire life with the question of how we grapple with what we term “an experience of God.”⁸

Panikkar’s work centers on the question of how we can engage in the “living tradition,”⁹ a space that takes seriously the spiritual dynamics of human life. Panikkar’s work challenges us to return, again and again, to the personal dimension of faith. For far too long, Panikkar argues, we have practiced theology, with the spiritual dynamic in our lives, as though it were a static object—a tendency of engagement that Panikkar terms *Christological* (*Christos* for Christ and *logia* pertaining to “a study of”).

⁸ Panikkar’s books and articles are myriad. The two principle texts we have used are *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) and *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). Panikkar is known for his groundbreaking work on inter-religious dialogue, specifically bringing in images and terms from Hinduism and Buddhism to illuminate Christian understandings. Many of Panikkar’s works are in his native Spanish, but several are translated.

⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, 27.

This objective mode of engagement can leave us unchanged because it, by definition, attempts to hold God at arm's length. In this way, religious studies begin to look like the natural sciences, with its specimens. Panikkar, though, argues that our engagement with God is not only something to be critically thought about but also something to be fully experienced. This engagement is his perspective of *Christophany* (*phaneo* pertaining to "a manifestation or a revelation"). Panikkar commends us to remember that "theology is not archaeology," but a fully lived experience.¹⁰ Panikkar's Christophanic view encourages participation of the whole person, which means that each person's encounter is wonderfully unique. Each of us is a singular being who encounters God and others, in effect, to see what particular meaning she can glean from her circumstances.¹¹ It is a view that engages both the past and the contexts of the present, a perspective that embraces both the *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding)¹² and the *intellectus fidei* (a critical engagement with the faith).¹³

Panikkar's Window Image

For Panikkar, a central question is how we dialogue with one another, while holding our different faith perspectives and experiences. To illustrate this dialogue, Panikkar uses the image of a window to highlight the importance of both self-awareness and respectful discourse. Panikkar describes our perspectives metaphorically as seeing through a window. And what

¹⁰ Panikkar, 27.

¹¹ Panikkar, 37. Here Panikkar offers a helpful image: "Divinity is precisely that immanence-transcendence that is inscribed in the heart of every being."

¹² See St. Anselm of Canterbury.

¹³ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany*, 11. Here it may be meaningful to clarify that Panikkar is not arguing that such a *Christophanic* orientation completely eradicates all of the formative work of *Christological* endeavors or perspectives. Instead, Panikkar lays out, in detail, the ways in which such a *Christophanic* orientation grounds an individual in a more experiential framework that engages with the whole breadth and depth of spiritual experience. *Christological* endeavors indeed do have their value and are necessary.

each of us sees through our own window is a different view than our neighbor's. We cannot say that we are unable to see through our own window, and our neighbor cannot deny what he sees through his window. Further, we realize that we do not see the whole world when we acknowledge our own limited, albeit authentic, perspective on reality through our respective lenses.¹⁴ The only faithful theological practice in this regard, then, for Panikkar is dialogue.¹⁵ Dialogue happens when two (or more) persons share their perspectives of spiritual experiences in a space that is encouraging, empowering, and receptive. The degree of *receptivity* experienced by those engaging in the experiential dialogue is vitally important.¹⁶

Experience as an Ontological "Touch"

It may be helpful at this juncture to offer a brief reflection on what we mean by *experience*. In our current congregational environment, especially within mainline denominations, there seems to be a certain understanding of *experience* that connotes overly-emotional states that can easily lead to a space that feels manipulative and coercive. We would be rightly suspicious of such a space of emotional manipulation that has as its goal a certain

¹⁴ For an experience of Panikkar describing this process himself, I encourage you to go online to www.raimon-panikkar.org. The website has a beautiful reflective video of Panikkar describing the engagement with the metaphor of windows.

¹⁵ Panikkar takes very seriously the need to engage with individual persons in a way that respects their own contexts. In describing the engagement with spiritual experiences, he quotes St. Thomas Aquinas in his understanding of revelation: "Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one who receives it" (*Experience of God*, 43).

¹⁶ *Experience of God*, 28ff. For an insightful exposition on the importance of receptivity, we invite you to explore more of Panikkar's use of a formula to describe such a dialogue. Panikkar offers the formula E=e.m.i.r., with E meaning "Experience," "a combination of (e) being the personal, unique experience that is conveyed by our memory (m), modeled by our imagination (i), and conditioned by its reception (r) in the cultural context of our time." Hence, the receptivity we would argue, is absolutely key in any ecclesial framework that wishes to engage in such a dialogue on experiences.

forced *obedience* to any religious leader's or community's ambition. Following Panikkar's lead, we believe that each of us already has an experience of God with or without the structure of religion. In this way, experiencing God is ontological to human beings. Each of us has moments in our lives when we feel ourselves connected to the 'Something More,' a deeper reality or connectivity that fosters a sense of belonging and broadens our understanding of our identity.

Panikkar's framework for engaging with *experiences* is set in an appreciative lens, albeit one that understands fully that all experiences are rooted in our limited human faculties. In his effort to move from a "study about" God (*Christological*) toward a perspective of faith that engages the mystical dimension of human existence (*Christophanic*), he writes: "Experience [is] understood as the consciousness of an immediate presence and thus as the irreducible instance of any human activity whatsoever—although even here we require verification from all other human faculties."¹⁷ In this way, experiences are not to be dismissed outright in exchange for some objective-focused endeavor that treats God and faith as something entirely removed from one's self. Persons are to be seriously engaged through actively listening to their experiences of God. Our experience is key in understanding why, how, where, and when we encounter God—and how we continue to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our interconnection with God. As Panikkar argues,

At the basis of faith, therefore, is an experience of union. I do not wish to be misunderstood. The word "experience" is ambiguous and polysemic. In this instance it is not a question of a mere psychological experience, but of an ontological "touch," so to speak. It is an experience that transforms our entire being.¹⁸

¹⁷ Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 11.

¹⁸ Panikkar, 21.

We may now inquire as to the shape of a process of dialogical encounter that honors a person's respective "ontological touch," their own unique and informed experiences, within a particular church community, while simultaneously honoring the community and its faith tradition. We turn to a twentieth-century German philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer, to help provide just such a lens with his fusion of horizons.¹⁹

Hans Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

We are drawn to Gadamer's fusion of horizons because it explores the way we come to understand both individual and collective experiences.²⁰ Gadamer's hermeneutics have been applied in many disciplines, including literary studies, theology, legal studies, sociology, art history, and cultural studies with each critically examining why Gadamer's hermeneutical paradigm is useful in these fields.²¹ Simply put, Gadamer changed the course of continental philosophy in *Truth and Method* by entering into the philosophic dialogue the historical notion of hermeneutics in a groundbreaking way. "While Gadamer was carrying on the tradition of hermeneutics set forth by Schleiermacher (biblical studies), by Dilthey (historical studies), and by Heidegger (ontological studies), his contribution to philosophic hermeneutics was ground-breaking."²² Gadamer broke with the rationalists, who were striving for a theoretical understanding of human nature, and embraced a hermeneutical understanding of "other." This hermeneutical process for Gadamer allows us to understand how it is possible to know "*the genuinely 'other' despite 'my own' convictions and opinions*; that is to say, how it

¹⁹ Hans G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²⁰ The rationale for choosing Gadamer's hermeneutics is two-fold. First, Gadamer's schema of the fusion of horizon connects with our weekly practice of biblical exegesis and, second, his hermeneutics focuses on the ways in which we engage the other.

²¹ H. J. Silverman, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²² Silverman, 18.

is possible to know them *both*.”²³ For this article, the “other” incorporates the None, the member of the congregation, the religious leader and, even, the faith tradition itself. It is a dialogue of this group that we believe is a vital to hear God’s mission in a particular time and place.

Hermeneutics Defined

The history of hermeneutics started long before Gadamer’s landmark work, *Truth and Method*. Hermeneutics is classically defined as the interpretation that is reserved for the priesthood and lawyers. The theologian’s method of interpreting the biblical text and the judge’s method of interpreting the law code were learned in their respective schools. It is this process of understanding, or meaning-making, that is at the heart of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.²⁴ With the widespread usage of hermeneutics in various fields of research today, however, the term itself has become convoluted.²⁵ Hermeneutics for us is a family of concerns that has at least these three critical perspectives:

- (1) The resistance to positivism that posits that *understanding* can only take place when we objectively examine a phenomenon; therefore, the observer is

²³ Hans G. Gadamer in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 159.

²⁴ The Greek god Hermes served both as messenger and patron for the other gods. His deliverance of divine messages (understanding) would sometimes not be the whole truth and nothing but the truth, since Hermes was also the patron god of cunning and theft. Therefore, it seems rather appropriate that this method of interpretation be named after such a god that might not disclose all there is to be known.

²⁵ As Wachterhauser has noted, hermeneutics is “now used in so many different contexts with so many different meanings that it no longer has univocal meaning. This is probably no accident, for hermeneutics represents not so much a highly honed, well-established theory of understanding or a long-standing, well-defined tradition of philosophy as it does a family of concerns and critical perspectives that is just beginning to emerge as a program of thought and research. Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed., *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1986), 5.

independent of what is studied. In this way, understanding is acontextual.²⁶

- (2) The resistance to relativism, which holds as its basic conviction that “there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms.”²⁷
- (3) The critical perspective that “all human understanding is never ‘without words’ and never ‘outside of time.’...In short, hermeneutical thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limits of understanding.”²⁸

Gadamer tells us that understanding the meaning of a tradition inherently involves our own hermeneutical situation or horizon. Consequently, understanding is an interpretative exercise. “All understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves understanding. (This claim scandalizes those who think that there is or can be ‘objective understanding,’ freed from all prejudices and not ‘contaminated’ by interpretation.)”²⁹ With understanding and interpretation, application is also tightly woven into the whole process for Gadamer. These three are internally related and function nonlinearly. Understanding involves interpretation, and interpretation involves application, and application informs understanding. This nonlinear play can start with any of the three. Furthermore, because these three are seamlessly woven together, we move into one without really ever leaving the other two. Finally, because we practice our understanding and interpretation in practical matters, to be told what to think and how to act by “experts” or the “anonymous authority” (i.e., the

²⁶ For a more in depth discussion of positivism, and its related paradigms of interpretivism and constructivism, see David G. Forney, “Getting Our Bearings: A Schema for Three Ways of Knowing,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, vol 3, no. 1 (2004): 15–41.

²⁷ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 8.

²⁸ Wachterhauser, 5-6.

²⁹ Bernstein, 138-139.

cleric, the creed, or the polity) is, in the extreme, a deification of office and role. And it is this deification of the expert (in whatever form it takes), that is especially pernicious to Gadamer.

[This philosophical hermeneutics] corrects the peculiar falsehood of modern consciousness: the idolatry of scientific method and of the anonymous authority of the sciences and it vindicates again the noblest task of the citizen—decision-making according to one’s own responsibility—instead of conceding that task to the expert. In this respect, hermeneutic philosophy is the heir of the older tradition of practical philosophy.³⁰

While Gadamer is critiquing the scientific method and the scientist, we believe this deification of knowledge and method by the clergy has diminishing returns in the twenty-first century, especially with the “Nones.”³¹

Fusion of Horizons Defined

So instead of the church’s clergy, tradition, or governance being the touchstone of truth, we advocate Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons,” as a way of framing a dialogue of spiritual experiences where

every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence an essential part of the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.³²

Our particular horizon is created by our pre-judgments, or prejudices, which are constituted (1) by the traditions

³⁰ Hans G. Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Sciences,” *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2 (1975): 316.

³¹ The professionalization of the clergy was part of the general cultural trend with lawyers, doctors, professors, military over the past 150 years. The worst form of this professionalization, clericalism, is at cross purposes with Christ’s permanent priesthood (Heb. 8:24) and our call to be a priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2).

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.

handed down to us, (2) by our own current understandings and social location (including our ethnicity, educational attainment, gender, socialization, economic standing, etc.), and (3) by our anticipation of what will be. The horizon that is created in any given moment, therefore, is open to both external and internal influences.

In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.³³

How, then, do we come to understand another's horizon?

Gadamer points to a fusion of horizons whereby one horizon is changed by the engagement with another horizon (be it an object like art, experiences like worship, or another person). Again, interpretation is understanding. This engagement is represented by the initial overlap that is created as the interpretive process takes place. "Gadamer wants to show how the tradition communicates its goods, passes on its wealth. He describes a process in which horizons are formed and reformed, in which they mutually enrich and expand one another."³⁴ For Gadamer, the medium of our horizons is linguistic. So engaging in dialogue with the other brings not only a new understanding of the other, but also of

³³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

³⁴ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 108.

ourselves—“only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves.”³⁵

The Obedire Project: A Case Study

Taking the juxtaposition of these two powerful images, Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” and Panikkar’s “window,” we wonder how we might cultivate a space within a congregation that fosters a generative dialogue, or appreciative inquiry,³⁶ into the spiritual experiences of those who are seeking a deeper understanding/encounter with God within a particular community of faith. This is the critical task before us as we envision a new paradigm of ecclesial formation given the rise of the Nones who believe in God and pray daily.

Recent explorations at St. Benedict’s Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Georgia, offer one pattern for the cultivation of an appreciative framework. St. Benedict’s parish is a five year-old new church development in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. Early on, the church development framework placed a strong emphasis on hospitality and membership development, with a keen eye toward the need for ongoing, intentional spiritual formation among the people who were coming to the parish from many varieties of spiritual and religious backgrounds. What we have found there hundreds of people who could be described as “unchurched” as well as “spiritual but not religious.” Because of this context, we have had the opportunity to explore the intentional cultivation of spiritual formation paradigms. The Obedire Project has been our evolving framework for such a context.

Obedire is one particular program that both takes advantage of the particular None demographic and goes

³⁵ Hans Gadamer in Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 143-144.

³⁶ Much more could be said pertaining directly to the specific technique of Appreciative Inquiry, but for the purposes of this particular article, we wish to focus on the broad theme of an appreciate space that fosters open inquiry and wondering among people who can be described as seekers.

well beyond a typical, didactic or lecture-based approach to curricular development; instead, it delves into the cultivation of an actual encounter of experiences by those who are new to the parish community. The word *Obedire* is the Latin root for our modern English word *obedience*, which has its origin in deep, attentive listening in relationship than a mere following of external rules and/or behavioral codes, or simply submitting to the external religious authority of the clergy. The deeper resonances of *obedience*, therefore, demand that we enter into such an appreciative and dialogical space—such as Panikkar and Gadamer both describe—and engage with one another in a way that both honors the experiences of individuals and the faith tradition thereby, fostering more holistic encounters of God within the community.

An Embodied Example of the Encounter Among Spiritual Experiences

In its application at St. Benedict's, all new visitors, seekers, and recent transfers are invited to participate in the cultivation of the space itself, using an intentionally developed *contemplative curriculum*.³⁷ A hallmark of the *Obedire* experience is that the conversations continue even after the typical confirmation or new member cycle is completed. Confirmation, Reception, or Reaffirmation³⁸ is not seen as the completion of a person's journey of faith. Hence, being baptized, confirmed, or received as a new member does not make one a *complete* Baptist,

³⁷ For in-depth information on the Obedire Curriculum, go online to www.obedire.com. That website houses the parish discussions and classes that use Obedire in our Confirmation classes and at other times during the year.

³⁸ Here, you may very well insert whatever particular ecclesiological paradigm your denomination offers for a "mature affirmation of faith" at some point in the life of the individual person of faith. The basic argument here is how we view such rites of mature affirmation as the end product of that particular dimension of the journey of faith—within the church community and denomination—and how we struggle with the deeper issues of church attendance and engagement. How might we reframe the conversation to rest upon the deeper engagement?

Episcopalian, or Presbyterian. Far from it. Even after completing the *Obedire* curriculum and after being confirmed, the new members are invited back to continue the conversation—together as a community. The horizon, per Gadamer, continues to be formed and reformed, always deepening and expanding conversation partners. The class participants, Panikkar would say, continue to be enriched by the experiences and visions they share from the perspectives found in their respective windows. There is an intentionality that empowers each person to claim her own spiritual journey and her own identity as a seeker who is beloved by God. Throughout this faith development, we all (religious leader, member, and seeker alike) grow in our awareness, identity, and appreciation of one another as children of God.

One example of the more contemplative-oriented curriculum of *Obedire* may elucidate the particular perspective it offers. When we are discussing Church History, a subject that too often claims to be an objective study of past events that helped shape our understanding of how Christianity *is* the way it *is* today, we try to take an approach that appreciates Panikkar's "ontological touch."³⁹ Class participants are first encouraged to look at their own lives and plot on a time line those events in their life which held deep spiritual significance for them. Questions that help frame the conversation are "How did God feel especially real to you at that moment?" and "How did God feel more distant to you at that time in your life?" It is not about imposing a preconceived idea that "a strong experience of God must mean you are closer to God." Instead, the exercise deliberately invites class members to delve into their own experiences, their own encounters with that "something More" that continues to intrigue them. They name their own *windows*; they name their own experiences, *touches* of God from their particular *horizons* and, in doing so, gain mutual understanding of the ways God has moved in their history and in the present. Such an engagement with their

³⁹ Panikkar, *Christophany*, 21.

own spiritual experiences leads them directly into a new appreciation of Church History, namely, by realizing that the saints and figures we study *about* did themselves have spiritual experiences that they struggled to understand in their own time—and which resonated with the wider community. In this way, the individual experiences of persons within the *Obedire* program are understood as being interconnected with Church History in a much more profound manner.

This being said, what might be some of the critiques to such an approach? An Episcopal colleague in Ohio recently introduced *Obedire* to diocesan officials there. While she shared that they were intrigued at the appreciative approach and the emphasis on listening and experiential dialogue, one clergy person thought that such an approach might be too intrusive to folks who were new to the faith community. What *Obedire* seeks to show, among other things, is that such perceptions of hermeneutical approaches (i.e., feeling that such conversations are intrusive) are actually grounded in our own lack of experience (and comfort?). Or, in Panikkar's parlance, we believe a *Christophanic* framework rather than a *Christological* one is more authentic and, actually, more sought-after. God is already at work in everyone's life before, during, and after church. Therefore, all we are doing with an appreciative hermeneutic is to make a space to listen. Perhaps, though, we are hesitant to engage in just such a space because it risks that our own horizons might be changed by the encounter.

Nevertheless, *Obedire* explicitly supports the notion that every individual's experience of God has intrinsic worth and significance, both for them and for the wider community in which they are a part. It is a framework that encourages the notion of the church community as a place of spiritual inquiry, nurture, and encouragement, rather than a place solely for objective instruction. As Tilden Edwards points out, we would do well to remember that the root of the word "seminary," to

continue the emphasis on education, “derives from the Latin word for ‘seed plot,’ or ‘nursery.’”⁴⁰ The same deep meaning can be easily applied to the congregation’s education and spiritual formation initiatives. *Obedire* seeks to emphasize such a manner of discipleship, holding up the value of each individual seeker’s capability to engage his or her faith in a way that honors the Spirit’s movement.

Openness to what might be given in the living moment might threaten the coherence of my talk, and the mind loves orderly, securing coherence, even though what we know of the Spirit’s ways should lead us to appreciate potentially disruptive surprises.⁴¹

Conclusion

For an event at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, renowned spiritual writer and former warden of Iona Abbey, J. Philip Newell, wrote,

The great spiritual quest of the Western world today is not about belief in God. It is about the experience of God. It is about seeking to encounter Sacredness now—in the earth, in our relationships with one another, and in the simple disciplines of contemplative practice.⁴²

Such an engagement in experience and encounter may not be the usual route taken in congregational approaches to spiritual formation and Christian education. Many of our experiences of these spaces have been more in the line of “here are crucial things you need to know in order to be communicant in good standing or a faithful church member.” The usual pattern followed by congregations is to learn about a topic of faith or religious practice, either

⁴⁰ Tilden Edwards, *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way: The Promise of a Contemplatively-Oriented Seminary* (The Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, 2010), 3.

⁴¹ Edwards, 16.

⁴² For more information on the Shalem Institute, explore online at www.shalem.org.

by reading a book or by coming to hear the religious leader share his or her thoughts. Such an approach is didactic in nature, emphasizing a certain objectivity and distance between *the person* and *proper understandings of God*.

By reflecting on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Panikkar's theological image and concept of an ontological touch, we have laid out a possible framework for experiential dialogue that honors and nurtures the spiritual journeys of members and seekers within congregations. We do believe that congregations suffer when the only meaningful *expert* on God in the room is the pastor. This clericalism does not honor God's mission in and through the lives of the congregants or visitors but, rather, serves to privilege a particular theological heritage and the particular pastor's experience of God.

Looking at the complexities of our current situation—and the struggles our churches face—might the question shift from one of “how *can* we offer such a space for the cultivation of a deeper appreciation for the spiritual experiences of church members” to “how *will* we embrace our vulnerability and vocation as we offer such a space that fosters rich dialogue in the context of the complex tradition of the church?” Such a space is as life-giving as it is risk-taking. Furthermore, it is a space that takes seriously a trust that God is at work within the life of each and every person and strives to understand together that *something More* that continues to draw all people closer to their true identity in God.

Such a perspective of engagement asks the congregation to explore how it can engage directly in this tension, moving away from a strict protectionist stance reinforcing clericalism to fruitful dialogue around *first order spiritual experience*. There are risks, to be sure, and there is a level of vulnerability entailed. It is a vulnerable and rich space, indeed, when we can cultivate such a space that fosters a deep, honoring relationship between individuals within a community. When we trust in the Spirit's presence, we can share of our own *touches* of God, through an honest sharing of our perspectives in our own

windows. We can be enriched by an encounter of *horizons* that challenges us to delve more intentionally in the discernment of God's Mission in our lives. We can experience how such a Spirit-prompted space of dynamic, rich, and challenging encounters in our congregations can awaken us to a much more complex and honoring vision of Christian unity. In keeping with this perspective of an experiential dialogue with the tradition, perhaps the Prophet Isaiah's words offer us as religious leaders a space to have our horizons broadened.

*The former things I declared long ago,
 they went out from my mouth and I made them known;
 then suddenly I did them and they came to pass.
 Because I know that you are obstinate,
 and your neck is an iron sinew
 and your forehead brass,
 I declared them to you from long ago,
 before they came to pass I announced them to you,
 so that you would not say, "My idol did them,
 my carved image and my cast image commanded them."
 You have heard; now see all this;
 and will you not declare it?
 From this time forward I make you hear new things,
 hidden things that you have not known.
 They are created now, not long ago;
 before today you have never heard of them,
 so that you could not say, "I already knew them."*

Isaiah 48:3-7