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

LISA M. HESS

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

Introduction

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theologically sound leadership in today's quickly changing institutional ecologies without on the one hand, solidifying outdated, overly modern presuppositions, or on the other hand, buckling under an irresponsible relativism unable to nurture spiritual hunger?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

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

Within its praxis-theory-praxis evolution, *artisanal theology* names both a pathway and product of an intentional formation within and beyond institutions of theological resourcing today. It is rooted in covenantal and radically covenantal companionships and witnessed to, stewarded by, historical faith traditions. One recognizes it, concretely, in an expressive theological delight able to companion the suffering of self and others. In its most basic expression, an artisanal theology emerges as an embodied path of insight received in the willing surrender to time-consuming and communal spiritual practices whereby previously hidden and critical interconnections may be revealed—made sensible—and secondarily, given partial expression within critical thought. Its pathway has already been given preliminary shape in the primarily relational knowing rooted in the storying practices of spiritual autobiography, case-studies, and writings of theological integration.¹

This essay invites a more sustained articulation of its critical method, what might be called a *contemplative empiricism*, for practical theological contribution in religious leadership. Contemplative empiricism will be defined and then its challenge to correlational habits of mind will be explored in the *theological* work of Jean-Luc Marion, specifically his reorientation of rationality within love's horizon, what he calls philosophically *love without being* and theologically *God without Being*. The methodological operations of a contemplative empiricism will then be spelled out before the essay concludes with the overarching learning tasks and signature theological delight through which artisanal theology has been conceived and is recognizable.

Contemplative Empiricism?

Empiricism historically and philosophically names the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only

¹ Lisa M. Hess, *Artisanal Theology: Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009).

source of knowledge.² John Locke excluded some things like logic and mathematics from his empiricism, opening a doorway to challenge the “only” in that definition. Knowledge included the mathematical cathedrals of the mind, sustained with logic of inestimable or inarticulate beauty.³ Immanuel Kant went whole hog into an idealism, returning the empiricism of sense-perceptions to a neglected backyard phenomenology has been attempting to clean up ever since.⁴ The “radical” or “all-encompassing” empiricism of William James re-opened the door to sense-perceptions and more. He pursued knowledge with a supple, inquisitive openness to all experience, not only that identified with clear-cut sensory data, passively received or free of theory-content. In the throes of these realistic-idealistic currents, contemporary practical theologians have balanced between contributions emphasizing right thinking and those urging more attention to right action. For instance, the empirical theology van der Ven investigates sees experience as the “here-and-now actualization of religious attitudes, which consist of cognitive, affective and volitive components.”⁵ He categorizes experience as cognitive, affective, and volitive—a good blend of orthodox habits of mind and feeling, alongside corresponding orthopraxis of will, volition, and agency.

Rarely juxtaposed with empiricism, *contemplation* refers to a mindful practice of non-conceptuality and companionable delight, if not outright erotic union. Interestingly, the role of sensation plays its ambivalent

² This overly brief excursus relies heavily on Johannes van der Ven [*Practical Theology: an Empirical Approach* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing, 1993), 10ff], whose work brought me to the term. My ultimate sense of it differs greatly from what he would claim, however.

³ Roger Woolhouse, “Locke’s Theory of Knowledge,” *Cambridge Companion to John Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146-71.

⁴ Charles Parsons, “The Transcendental Aesthetic,” *Cambridge Companion to Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 62-100.

⁵ Van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 10.

melody here too. Depending upon tradition, contemplative practice promises wildly contradictory ends. At one end, we see a submission and detachment from all sense experience for legitimate knowledge. Philosophical contemplation of this sort offers the frustration of beautiful conviction yet overly tidy methods for verification, validation, and legitimation, often within neglected but influential contexts made apparent in sociologies of knowledge. At the other end, we see an exploration and potential renewal of sense experience, deepened and broadened before potentially being released and revived—made more vibrant and exquisite. This contemplation resembles mystical experience described in sensate or even erotic language. Again, contemplation on its own offers utter conviction but an unavailability of verifiable paths to legitimated knowledge.

Contemplative empiricism brings these epistemological-ontological extremes together to name a receptive, listening posture of *theological* inquiry governed primarily by a “contemplative turn,” guided toward what James Heisig calls *orthoesthesia*, or a “recovery of the senses.” Within a comparative-religious frame of inquiry, Heisig advocates for a critical surrender to sensate insight that releases the scholar from previous attachment to ordinary (i.e. previous, well-established) ideas *and* from previously embodied (or lack of embodied) ways of engaging theological discipline.

In the same way that consistency with received tradition is taken as a measure of religious truth, or *orthodoxy*, the embodiment of a tradition in the moral choices of life is understood to be a measure of religious action, or *orthopraxis*. But these two—right thinking and right action—are incomplete without some measure of the true liberation of the senses, an *orthoesthesia*.⁶

⁶ James W. Heisig, “The Recovery of the Senses: Against the Asceticisms of the Age,” in *Dialogues at One Inch Above the Ground: Reclamations of Belief in an Interreligious Age* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 74.

In similar fashion, a contemplative empiricism is entirely rooted and apprehended in the excessive self-revelation of God as Love, given *theological* expression in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. It describes a radically sensate approach to theological knowledge received, released, and renewed within covenantal inquiry and graced awareness. It offers a sensate and thematically empirical method, though quite distinct from Johannes van der Ven's sense of empiricism. This recovery stabilizes and repeatedly renews the balance between orthodoxy-orthopraxis debates so prevalent within theological disciplines today with a true liberation of the senses. They are not neglected or denied but heightened, with perceptions then released and potentially re-received through critical, covenantal inquiry. In this stabilized balance and centralization of awareness in liberated sensation, a contemplative empiricism promises a *theological* method with non-correlational hue. Not only does learning become reoriented toward *embodied* insight, but comprehensive learning tasks of theology in a performative mode become newly articulated for an artisanal theology, recognizable in an expressive delight able to companion the suffering of self and others.

Non-Correlational Method?

Theological scholarship today has inherited dialectical, correlational habits of mind, which are elegant but distracting, for embodied-spirits living into the rigor of discipleship and an interdependence (even assurance) of faith become embodied insight, received again and again. "Correlation" can refer to many things, of course, depending upon discourse and scholarly inclination. At its most basic or non-disciplinarily defined sense, correlation refers to "a causal, complementary, parallel, or reciprocal relationship, especially a structural, functional, or qualitative correspondence between comparable entities."⁷ The stated need for a conceptual

⁷ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

relationship between two entities has brought a tension for theologians historically. The perceivable chasm existing historically between revelation—the disclosures of God—and reason—the orderly, potentially abstracted, at least publically verifiable way of thinking—means that a bridge between them is necessary for comprehension, understanding, interpretation. Correlation within theological discourse therefore refers to the strategies traditionally configured in the negotiation of publicly verifiable reason with intimately convicted revelation.

This began with what we would call a philosophical problem today, though at its origin, such disciplinary specialization is anachronistic. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's project of logic, history, and spirit suggested interpreting the Christian tradition dialectically with religious questions, the religious dimension, resulting in a virtual identification between Christianity and Absolute religion.⁸ The system was so all-encompassing that it attempted to eschew, or conform, all voices into its dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis). Søren Kierkegaard crafted an entire authorship in pseudonymous and personal names to refute Hegel's grand System of such "correlation," which he thought arguably amounted to systemic assimilation of a wholly other God into human rationality(ies). Theologian Paul Tillich opened some spaciousness with his correlational work, mid-twentieth century, positing fewer identifications between Christian tradition and the existential situation, but offering, instead, analogies-in-difference that made a correlational theology palatable.⁹ Difference was sustainable, could even be relational. Mutually critical correlation, a la David Tracy, then offers us the gift of necessary suspicion about modernity's systems and claims, a path to explore various differences from all perspectives, both from 'questions'

⁸ See Michael Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method," *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Fredrick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 130-70.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 59ff.

and from ‘answers’ imaginable. In an early essay, Tracy defines theology as “the discipline that articulates mutually critical correlations between the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the Christian fact and the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the contemporary situation.”¹⁰ Alongside then come plentiful voices omitted or outright silenced, no less a part of the human condition than those things the Hegelian System chose to see, focus on. Tracy’s “revised critical correlational method” stands as one of the steadiest pillars in correlational approaches for a “contemporary, fundamental theology” today.

Correlation therefore functions theologically within the potentially, but not necessarily, antagonistic relationship between reason and revelation, given more flesh by Tracy in his introduction to Jean-Luc Marion’s *God Without Being*.¹¹ The Reason side of the modern project engages critical-analytical efforts to observe the world and God empirically and then develop understanding and objective knowledge determined by a shared rationality but turned toward the disclosures of revelation established by tradition and scripture. The other side—the Revelation side—engages different efforts to observe and understand God and the world, placing reason *in service of* revelation, which is understood as the sole foundation of theology. Correlation refers to the modern strategies, then, to relate in some fashion—causal, complementary, parallel, reciprocal, analogical, etc.—the claims of an independent reason with a divine-human revelation. On the one hand, revelation theologians appear intractable for more publicly verifiable reason. On the other, reason theologians imply unthinking assimilation to worldly logics untenable in religious faith and scriptural/traditional authorit(ies).

¹⁰ David Tracy, “The Foundations of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology: the Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don S. Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 62.

¹¹ David Tracy, “Introduction,” Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), ix-xi.

Tracy observes here that correlation on the revelation side is at best a category mistake. Revelation is received, not negotiated or analyzed. At worst, correlation attempts to domesticate the reality of God within the confines of human reason. Here lies the delightful and distracting “reason vs. faith,” “human and/or theological sciences” bedrock most theologians confront at sometime in their disciplinary formation. In contrast, Jean-Luc Marion’s model for theology, in the words of Tracy, “does not partake of *any* form of this...familiar correlational stance...[he] moves outside all correlational strategies.”¹²

The son of an engineer and a teacher, born on the outskirts of Paris in 1946, Jean-Luc Marion contributes to both philosophy and theology—intentionally, distinctly—an integrity of love’s phenomenality or *caritas*’s theological rigor.¹³ Based at both the Sorbonne and the University of Chicago, Marion aims to speak *love* for modern philosophy that has largely silenced or at least betrayed and mistreated it.¹⁴ Theologically, he interprets a terrifying rigor of *caritas* for Christian theologians who, he says, know so much about it that they cannot fail to impose a significance so rooted in Christ’s Passion that it annuls the phenomenality and immanence of passion itself.¹⁵ He suggests that contemporary theological knowledge questionably witnesses to *caritas*, *except* in its proper horizon of God without Being, God who sacrificed being out of deeper love, God’s excessive self-revelation as Love. Marion’s work ultimately confronts the reader with the untenable possibility that our age professes love while prostituting its essence, presumes knowledge while propagating greater and greater ignorance. Here I was introduced to—even summoned by—a French-Catholic, philosopher-theologian who

¹² Tracy, “Introduction,” xi.

¹³ See Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: a Theo-Logical Introduction* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2004).

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁵ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 1.

shakes the pillars of traditional certainties for the *theological* rigor of *caritas*¹⁶ and the promise of a pure assurance within the erotic phenomenon, beyond the metaphysics of the subject and into an embodied strength-in-weakness. Marion's authorship is dense and multi-faceted, so bear with me on brevity as we approach newly non-correlational, *theological* underpinnings for a contemplative empiricism.

Jean-Luc Marion and the Contemplative Turn

Marion's work supports what I will call "the contemplative turn" within theological inquiry willing to be overwhelmed by the *theological* rigor of *caritas* made palpable (if critically inarticulate) within embodied insight. Observing a textual omission in Descartes' manuscript of the *ego cogito*, Marion traces the philosophical and theological significance of modernity's primacy of knowledge unto love against the critical claim of the erotic phenomenon itself to reorient knowledge within love's primacy, rationality, and unity.

He begins with a historical-textual study of Descartes' *ego cogito*, in which he observes a crucial omission of love's primacy within the human condition. Descartes' initial manuscript with the famous *ego cogito* is literally translated as "I am a thinking thing, that is to say one which doubts, which affirms, which denies, which understands few things, which is ignorant of many, which wills, which does not will, which imagines, too, and which even feels."¹⁷ Marion pushes into the omission of love. "Fine," he writes, "except that it follows by omission that I am

¹⁶ In line with Marion's usage and with secondary source material, I will use *caritas* within theological language(s), *love* within philosophical nuances. Marion articulates the erotic phenomenon which may then be examined, distinctly, in both theological and philosophical disciplines of thought. Additionally and to avoid the popularized nuances that accompany *charity*, I have chosen (in contrast with Marion's translators) to use 'caritas' instead of 'charity' in my own writing.

¹⁷ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 6-7. "Ego sum res cogitans, id est dubitans, affirmans, negans, pauca intelligens, multa ignorans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque et sentiens."

no longer supposed to love, nor to hate; or better: I am of such a sort that I have neither to love, nor to hate, at least in the first instance. ... [Humanity], as *ego cogito*, thinks, but he does not love, at least from the outset.”¹⁸ In support of the importance in this omission, Descartes’ first translator—the Duc de Luynes—*corrects* this original omission in Descartes’ text.¹⁹ One could immediately suggest a critical flaw in Marion’s work here, but creation *ex nihilo* does have grand precedent, a *theological* fingerprint.

In contrast to the epistemological and ontological trajectories of modernity, Marion identifies as central two starkly different questions of the human condition—Does anyone love me? Can I love first?—and places his work at a right angle to now-classically philosophical (and relatedly, theological) thought embroiled in the metaphysics of the subject and onto-theological thought. He argues that a traditional understanding of the *ego cogito* assures the certainty of objects while neglecting the certainty of the thinker, who the thinker is.²⁰ He proposes a radical (rooted) *erotic* reduction, underneath or preliminary to the epistemological and ontological ones, within a quest for assurance affirmed in an erotic rationality, which assures the ego from elsewhere. The ego, in Marion’s work, is a given (and gifted) phenomenon, assured within a love without being as such, free of vanity (the postmodern nihilisms, etc.). First, Marion acknowledges the *epistemic* reduction, or that which certifies an object as repeatable, permanent under the mind’s regard or gaze.²¹ This philosophical move establishes the centrality of the thinker and a useful ability to certify objects for public scrutiny. He then nods

¹⁸ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 7.

¹⁹ Rene Descartes, *Discourse A.T. IX-I*, p. 27, lines 7-10, trans. Duc de Luynes, cited in Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 7. “I know that I am a thing which thinks, that is to say which doubts, which affirms, which denies, which knows few things, which is ignorant of many, *which loves, which hates*, which wills, which does not will, which imagines, too, and which feels.”

²⁰ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 16ff.

²¹ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 21.

to the *ontological* reduction, or “that which only keeps in a thing its status as being in order to lead it back to its being, or indeed eventually, to track it to the point of catching a glimpse of being itself.”²² Both these moves offer certainty, a clarity of thought and communication about phenomena of mutual interest and complexity. Neither move ultimately satisfies the certainty of the thinker, however, the “me” each of us knows for him/herself. Therefore, beyond traditional metaphysical mores, Marion poses a third reduction, the *erotic* reduction, in which, he writes, “I must discover myself as a given (and gifted) phenomenon, assured as a given that is free from vanity.”²³ Here, metaphysics is abandoned and way opens for a primarily relational, unified, erotically rational, and non-correlational way of engaging the world. The key is the *quest for assurance* within a given and gifted phenomenality defined by the horizon of a *love without being*.

The quest for assurance differs radically from the quest for certainty in that it is shaped by the questions “Does anyone love me?” and “Can I love first?” instead of the more familiar “What do I want to know?” or “Who am I?” The shift is recognizable in a *reduced reciprocity, pure assurance, insufficient reason, compassionate advance, and strength in weakness*. Space disallows engagement with all of those phenomena, but an examination of *reduced reciprocity* will give you a glimpse of the promise here. Marion’s erotic reduction eradicates reciprocity, that give-and-take at the root of consumer and correlational understandings of the world. As a thinking being, an *ego cogito*, one faces the invitation of doubt and the quest for certainty with repeated attempts to certify the objects and important subjects in one’s world, to create one’s world in a recognizable, familiar fashion where one can be certain of love, resources, survival. Yet, these epistemic and ontological moves mean that love enters in only directly, with the ego’s

²² Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 21.

²³ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 22.

attempts to certify its existence and neutralize the felt threat of uncertainty and vanity. “Love here plays only the hypothetical and nearly unattainable correlate to my lack of assurance when confronting the question, ‘What’s the use?’...Love only appears by default.”²⁴ The epistemic and ontological reductions result in the objectification of both objects and subjects, distanced and then related again in various dialectical moves of consciousness.²⁵ In contrast, when the erotic reduction is in full force, the lover knows a pure assurance that then invites compassionate advance and strength in weakness.

When the question “Can I love first?” is answered in the affirmative, it has the “unmatched privilege of losing nothing, even if he happens to find himself unloved, because a love scorned remains a love perfectly accomplished, just as a gift refused remains a perfectly given gift. ... There is only one single proof of love—to give without return or chance of recovery, and thus to be able to lose, and, eventually, to be lost in love.”²⁶ You see, “To love without being loved—this defines *love without being*.”²⁷ The quest for assurance finds that assurance comes regularly to the willing lover. As Marion describes it: “Assurance still comes to me, but no longer from an ontic elsewhere that would conserve me in my beingness; rather it comes from an elsewhere that is more inward to me than myself: the elsewhere that comes upon me in the very gesture in which I give up what I have (my gift) and what I am, in order to assure myself only of

²⁴ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 68.

²⁵ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 69. In Marion’s words, “The *ego* does not venture onto the field of love except in order to escape from the risk of losing itself. ... It achieves only a narrow and parsimonious pre-understanding of love: it doesn’t have any, it needs some fast, and so it asks for it; the more ignorant it is of love’s dignity, its power, and its rules, the more frenetically it demands it. ... it hopes that love will give it assurance at a fair price....” “The *ego*, from the outset, expects from love only a more or less honest exchange, a negotiated *reciprocity*, an acceptable compromise.”

²⁶ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 71.

²⁷ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 72.

what I truly make in this instant—love.”²⁸ Asking and answering these ‘right-angle’ questions engages the *ego cogito* in the phenomenological moves toward knowledge’s horizon. Answering the second in the affirmative distinguishes love in its own horizon, a love without being that reduces reciprocity, that introduces a chosen surrender at the heart of all revelatory knowledge—scientifically in the surrender to incontrovertible evidence and theologically in the surrender to human limitation and the giftedness of love.

Ultimately, Marion’s radical sense of love/*caritas* is no longer something to be made or a secondary object or practice of a thoughtful understanding that will inspire it. Love already is. Love knows. Love bears all things. Love believes everything. Love loves without seeing. In Marion’s words, “Nothing can triumph over [love] because [its] very weakness makes [its] strength.”²⁹ Here comes the missing piece for philosophy’s (and much contemporary theology’s) failure to integrate knowledge, being, and doing in a coherent way. The promise here (for our purpose, especially) is a radically constructive and rigorously *theological* method in which dialectic lessens as love grows. Correlation becomes obsolete in an erotic rationality that assures an ego from elsewhere. Understanding and interpreting the meaning or significance become secondary to bringing shared awareness into a sensate present continuously received and not achieved. Love-without-being harnesses representational knowledge in the painful and painstaking immediacy of knowing *what is* as it becomes drawn out into *what could be* or *what is becoming*. Speaking theologically, then, Marion concludes: “Love knows. Not that it is always necessary to turn to love in order to know the objects of representation. ... But—and this will be my thesis—only love opens up knowledge of the other

²⁸ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 75.

²⁹ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 89.

as such. By which, at an inevitable distance, it recovers the function of charity.”³⁰

Marion anticipates resistance, of course, even honoring the refusal of *caritas*'s rigor: “Love treats only of the reason of loving and of making oneself loved: as long as we refuse to enter into this tautology, we inevitably degrade love to a metaphor of relation with objects (possession, production, conquest, consumption, and so on), and thereby miss it completely.”³¹ In willing surrender to enter into its rigor, however, *caritas* is no longer “given an interpretation” nor are any arbitrary forays into representational “love”—representing oneself in hopes of securing or achieving love—deemed to be *caritas*.³² Instead, *theological* knowledge, that knowledge in concern of the other opened up by love's rationality, *caritas*'s rigor, becomes reframed. *Theological* knowledge becomes an unconscious or non-subjective and non-masterable awareness of the other that brings consciousness of obligation, freedom from the intentionality of the *I*, and consent to being seen without seeing, loving without (necessarily) being loved. Here does love know, as it “opens up knowledge of the other as such.”³³ Here does an artisanal theology find its *theological* footing for living leadership into today's changing ecologies. Description of its methodological operations will make this discussion more concrete.

Methodological Operations of a Contemplative Empiricism

Bernard Lonergan's established methodological work places method's primary function as the ordering of inquiry and discovery of knowledge in alignment with the successful science of the time. His definition: method is “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations

³⁰ Jena-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis, Perspective in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham, 2002), 160.

³¹ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, x.

³² Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 71.

³³ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 160.

yielding cumulative and progressive results.”³⁴ His move was to go behind those procedures to the procedures of the human mind—a transcendental method. This is the move here, too, except with a movement into the recovery of the senses, the phenomenon of a scholar engaging a path of embodied insight shaped by theology in its contemplative turn. The contemplative empiricism here originates not initially within the reason/revelation tension, nor with an empiricism of the physical sciences. Prior to such methods, it originates within the scholar’s integrative-critical inquiry unto embodied insight returned to the world with heightened sensation and ability to see theological research and teaching within love’s primacy, rationality, and unity. This non-correlational theological method brings theological research into the unthinkable, perhaps, at least previously inconceivable categories trained by correlational habits of mind.

The normative pattern of assumptions roots entirely in what Jean-Luc Marion has called an *erotic rationality*, observable by two decisive traits of *caritas*. First, love does not suffer from the unthinkable or from the absence of conditions but is reinforced by them. What is peculiar to love consists in the fact that it gives itself. In contrast to the correlational desire to engage epistemological and ontological reductions unto certainty, a non-correlational method for an artisanal theology begins with *a willing surrender* to the subjectivity of the other, to the vulnerability of self in suffering, to the giftedness of *both* reason and revelation, as traditionally conceived in correlational models. Second, to think God as Love, philosophically as a love without being, equally prohibits ever fixing one’s aim and freezing it there. One knows God in God’s excessive self-revelation as Love, but it is an *unseeing sight*, a knowledge that knows in unknowing

³⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 3, 4. See also his *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: Regis College/Lonergan Research Institute, 1992), 4.

becomes knowing anew. Love does not pretend to comprehend, in other words, since it does not mean at all to take—*prehend*, take, *com*-together. In terms defined here, Love can only apprehend, take finite embodied form repeatedly within compassion. Love postulates its own giving, giving where the giver strictly coincides with the gift, without any restriction, reservation, or mastery. Thus love gives itself only in abandoning itself, ceaselessly transgressing the limits of its own gift, so as to be transplanted outside of itself. In this fashion, love's strength lies in its weakness, in its pure assurance and principle of insufficient reason, in its *spiritual resilience* beyond the more narrowly defined methods of correlational theologies. In this fashion, *theological knowledge* emerges in a willing surrender, unseeing sight, and spiritual resilience I have described elsewhere as a *disciplined spiritual stewardship*.³⁵ A sketch of the operations of embodied insight within this *contemplative empiricism* will help flesh out what the theology looks like.

A non-correlational method proceeds from the Holy-given gift of humility, which is also a precursor to theological delight. Humility does not mean, as Roberta Bondi observes, “a continuous cringing, cultivating a low self-image and taking a perverse pleasure in being always forgotten, unnoticed, or taken for granted.”³⁶ In its ancient sense, and as it is intended here, humility is primarily a relational term, motivated by the law in service of love, not guilt or shame or even a willful self-sacrifice. It is “an attitude of heart” without which virtues have no faithful context. It is difficult and calls for the renunciation of all that the modern world holds dear: material prosperity, advancement, satisfaction of desires at the expense of others, right to dominate.³⁷ Humility, therefore, cannot be humanly achieved, though it can be

³⁵ Lisa M. Hess, “Formation in the Worlds of Theological Education: Moving from What to How?” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11(1) (January 2008):18.

³⁶ Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 18.

³⁷ Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 54.

received in an active openness to “the other,” to God. Being open to knowledge rooted in the love of others requires a chosen, risked vulnerability, healthily chosen with curious willingness. This vulnerability is not a virtue in itself, but a venue to deepened awareness, healthy relationship, and encounter. It offers avenue to healthy relationships that sustain self and others. Vulnerability also entails risk of injury, of course, but injuries that can be stewarded wisely for greater understanding and unexpected compassion. The problem in theological disciplinary thought, of course, is that no one can teach humility. One receives it, models it, lives it. Even so, skills and practices—deep listening, covenantal belonging, spiritual practices centered in silence—can create intentionally, healthily vulnerable space within which receptivity grows, within which humility and theological delight then arrive.

Sustained spiritual disciplines of all kinds inform and reform the empiricism necessary for the artisanal theology witnessed here. An intentional return to quietist practices—meditation, *lectio divina*, and contemplation—is fundamental for the heightened sensation and deepened receptivity to observable phenomena that silence provides. An unspoken space or inarticulate immediacy, silence cannot be conceptually or linguistically or scientifically controlled. It can only be interrupted. In lived situations tinged heavily by technological rationalities, mastery, expertise, and achievement, silence is the only tactical response to the human misconceptions about our world amidst the invited divine and humanizing learning tasks to be sketched below. Spiritual disciplines, especially those centered in silence and truly indwelt in communities of radical covenant, ultimately facilitate awareness of unexpected interconnections and new discoveries within creation and beyond. No less important for the disciplined spiritual stewardship that undergirds non-correlational method are purposeless,

spontaneous practices of play.³⁸ Encouraging of spontaneity and experimentation, play naturally creates space within which previously unimagined connections and behaviors may reveal themselves to observation and uncontrolled awareness.

Ultimately, the operations of a contemplative empiricism for an artisanal theology prepare the *theologian* to pursue contributions to the discipline, guided by an assurance and strength-in-weakness recognizable by delight inarticulate within correlational habits of mind. What is observable is a radically sensate approach to *theological* knowledge rooted in practices of receptivity that heighten sensation, compassionate advance, and risked innovation upon behalf of the other. Hermeneutic, strategic, empirical, even fundamental models of theological research contribute their methods to particular investigations of phenomena and praxis, articulating potential significance and meaning correlated between verifiable observation and received understandings.³⁹ Non-correlational theology insures, however, that any comprehensive critical inquiry contributes its knowledge-unto-action rooted in the primacy, embodied rationality, and unity of love.

Learning Tasks for an Artisanal Theology in Religious Leadership Formation

Artisanal theology takes more concrete shape and critical contour when viewed in the governing learning tasks within its disciplinary evolution by means of a transformational logic or “the logic of the Spirit.”⁴⁰ Much

³⁸ Michael Koppel, “A Pastoral Theological Reflection on Play in the Ministry,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13(1) (2003): 3-12.

³⁹ Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, Studies in Practical Theology series (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 201ff. See esp. 235. See also Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

⁴⁰ These tasks are developed from the inaugural address of James E. Loder, “Transformation in Christian Education,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 3(1) (1980): 1-15.

theology, particularly practical theology as a discipline, has focused almost solely on the interpretive tasks of lived faith: how do we *understand* God's work in this time, this event, this place? What does this *mean* for what should be *done*? This highly literate and overly narrow emphasis upon interpretation and responsive action has overshadowed the multidimensional way of life that theology is within the emancipatory praxis of God. The burgeoning literature on Christian practices makes the same move as I argue for here, most recently in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*,⁴¹ yet most highly literate and disciplinary-trained theologians are not empowered to move beyond interpretation into the more publicly risky life of discipleship in the world. Including interpretation as a learning task of theology as engaged today, four other learning tasks become more crucial for mention in an artisanal theology known in its expressive delight able to companion suffering of self and other.

The first such learning task, *joyful celebration that yet knows sorrow*, is known in a cruciform community of disciples who share experience of a loving God and yet the seemingly unavoidable suffering of self and others. Embodied insight means immersion into the particular and shared experiences lived within human bodies in diverse sociocultural settings. Popular and theological cultures offer materialistic and liturgical practices in which individuals and communities may enjoy life, yet these practices often do not address the depth dimension of the human spirit aware of real suffering in a creation yet considered *good*. An artisanal theology requires a repeatedly practiced ability to be silenced in the face of sorrow and to celebrate the gift of life offered in grace. Much contemporary theology today suggests that such

<http://digital.library.ptsem.edu/default.xqy?src=PSB1980031.xml&div=4&img=1> (accessed February 1, 2009).

⁴¹ Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

shared sorrow and celebration have become neglected—not in personal lives but in the theological disciplines themselves. At the very least, while various disciplines offer well-researched perspectives on worship, preaching, even ritual studies, *celebration* within an intimately known and mutually shared expressive delight is rare.

The second learning task of contribution, *contemplative wondering*, is a life-giving, grace-filled exploration of the goodness, beauty, and truth within creation. This exploration is less and less available within theological learning communities governed by internalized dualisms, now apparent in forms of “in vs. out,” “us vs. them” communal norms. Only when faith communities remember the natural world in which they live and serve, only when we learn to value the other as much as we value ourselves, will the true miracle of life’s gifts infuse theological learning communities within and beyond the periphery of today’s institutions of higher education. Theological education, divided by ideological church disputes and pressured into new financial straits by a competitive market, too often neglects the practical theological task of contemplative wondering, a root of innovation and new life in the Spirit.

Passionate conviction describes the third learning task, much misunderstood in critical inquiry and debate within theological learning communities. This humble, self-effacing “assurance of things hoped for yet not seen,” this thirst for knowledge egged on by irresistible grace, has been replaced by increasingly rigid positions that claim a sure knowledge of God, scripture, and tradition. Truly convictional experience, however, is the *disruptive* means by which we perceive the new things of God, often in extreme discomfort. How to learn passionate conviction that is rooted in unseeing sight and the apprehension of knowledge released for new insight needs redefinition and new modeling by vital scholars-in-community in humble service of the other and the world.

The fourth learning task to be engaged in an artisanal theology may be described as *learning to face and embrace constructive conflict*. This is a necessary part of any critical

inquiry that intends to be associated with a transformational logic or transformation into new life and new understandings. The conflict of interpretations lies at the heart of contemporary theology today, for example, but it still lives a completely shadow-life within the praxis of theological educators in contemporary institutions of higher education. Until theologians engage their discipline as an integrative task of embodied insight, rooted in the complexities of their own lived experiences in addition to the received wealth of theological traditions, an artisanal theology will never take concrete shape. Not unlike the churches theological graduates serve, most theological learning communities avoid any semblance of conflict, except for what may be articulated within critical debate and literate discourse. Learning to face and embrace appropriate conflict as a primarily relational, intimate matter, at all levels of human experience, will always require explicit redress.

Delight

Ultimately, a contemplative empiricism with its non-correlational hue for artisanal theology is observable in an expressive theological delight, an integrative and embodied apprehension of learned discipline able to companion the suffering of self and others. This kind of theological delight is not a willed happiness in the face of pain, nor is it a Pollyanna preference for the beautiful or cheerful aspects of living. True delight is intimately related to a capacity for wonder, not self-deception; risked trust, not assured clarity. Delight balances an attentive discipline of wonder with accurate seeing that may discomfort. Scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi identifies this kind of delight in the intuited and then verifiable discovery of a scientific theory, for example.⁴² This kind of delight also empowers a willing participation in suffering—one's own and that of others—with a strength and gratitude for what life already is, as life. Not

⁴² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962), 133.

the companionship of suffering fueled by a rage—no matter how righteous—or a wound received and left untended. Not the willed sacrifice of time and personhood based on “should” and “ought” taught by culture. A theological delight originates from compassion unexpectedly received, hidden wounds healed, undeserved love erupting into situations of injustice or poverty. This kind of delight is a gift from elsewhere, a grace that cannot be grasped or produced, imposed or taught.

Delight can be received, however, through a quiet discipline and receptive practices within erotic rationality and covenantal relationship.⁴³ Delight is received through loving first, through facing the pain of one’s fears, wounds, limitations and then being moved beyond them into a pure assurance of caritas. It arrives unexpectedly after accepting the prickly realities of contemporary life and uncertain knowing. It comes amidst the hard work of prayer, in Roberta Bondi’s sense: not discarding damaged or inarticulate parts of ourselves, but gathering and reclaiming them for daily healing in the presence of God.⁴⁴ Unexpectedly, undeservedly, in proportion to one’s self-knowledge of true smallness, delight arrives, overflowing with an irrepressible joy. This is an observable paradox and felt-sensation of divinely intimate nobody-ness. It is received in the touch of a hand, or the brush of a breeze in a meadow. It can be found amidst bustling populations of passers-by on a street corner in Kentucky,⁴⁵ or in a field full of sunflowers. It comes with the aroma of freshly baked bread or the sacred heaviness

⁴³ Here the relational life of the theological scholar *does* factor into the authenticity of his/her research. How does the scholar’s relational life express itself, which inevitably undergirds disciplinary contributions? What lived inconsistencies drive his/her teaching and research, inseparable from his/her practiced relationship with an other, others?

⁴⁴ Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 33-5.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), reproduced in *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master: Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 144.

of incense offered in glorious praise and prayer. Delight arrives, and then it cannot be contained. Even the most arid theological prose can witness to it and create within the receiver's heart the seed that then blossoms in due season.

Regardless of explicit or implicit tradition, a non-correlational *theological* view is known by this expressive delight. Receptivity is key. Healthy receptivity that sustains authentic intimacy must be one of covenant, rooted in the promises and merciful justice of the Holy, not in the needs or desires of other human beings. Covenantal community upholds the best self of each of us and mirrors failings in a gentle invitation to grow. It interprets and goads each of us into deeper and deeper expression of an articulate, interpersonally and traditionally-rooted life of faith and service. It meets our deepest hungers with God's most gracious nurture. A non-correlational method for an artisanal theology therefore engages the ever-present and repeated possibility of embodied insight within the visible, sensate world, which therefore places primary emphasis upon an empiricism shaped by receptivity and love, not positivistic objectivity and distancing.

In conclusion, contemplative empiricism as method for an artisanal theology pushes theologians willing to engage non-correlational habits of mind, to venture into terrain uncomfortable yet inevitably promising in its clarity and distinction for previously indeterminate contributions. "Here is the qualification," Marion writes, "extra-scientific but essential, that makes the *theologian*: the referent is not taught, since it is encountered by mystical union."⁴⁶ This leads, additionally, to Marion's conclusion: "we are infinitely free in theology: we find all already given, gained, available. It only remains to understand, to say, and to celebrate. So much freedom frightens us, deservedly."⁴⁷ The challenges of this perspective within today's technological rationalities and

⁴⁶ Marion, *God Without Being*, 157.

⁴⁷ Marion, *God Without Being*, 158.

corporate consumerism cannot be overstated. It is certainly easier to hide within the happy uncertainties of faith and the peacefulness and serenity of hope.⁴⁸ It is the *theological* rigor of *caritas*, however, that remains to be lived repeatedly anew into today's technological rationalities and corporate consumerisms by religious leaders today. It is nothing like our conceptual idols of God or love suggest, but an ever-deepening inquiry into lived experiences, summoned by a Love whose mercies are never-ending. As we asked at the beginning: How do we identify theologically sound leadership in today's quickly changing institutional ecologies without on the one hand, solidifying outdated, overly modern presuppositions, or on the other hand, buckling under an irresponsible relativism unable to nurture spiritual hunger? Look for the signature delight, alive in eyes and heart and able to witness to timeless truths in time-laden particularities, always changing yet ever assured, and most importantly, able to sustain witness amidst the suffering of self and others.

⁴⁸ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 153-154.