GATHERED WORSHIP AND THE IMMANENT FRAME: MISINTERPRETING AND REINTERPRETING GOD'S PRESENCE IN WORSHIP

by

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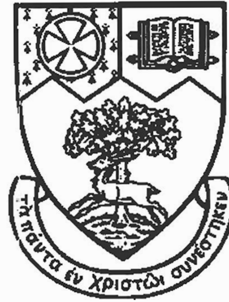

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ABSTRACT

"Gathered Worship and the Immanent Frame: Misinterpreting and Reinterpreting God's Presence in Worship."

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Christian theology (whether biblical or liturgical) generally affirms that God is somehow present in the setting of gathered worship. However, it is often the case that many worshippers themselves (and even ministers) might not perceive that God is present to the church in any discernible way, leading to worship practices that may functionally ignore God's presence, or that may attempt to conjure up some feeling that something transcendent is happening in worship. This thesis attempts to use Charles Taylor's concept of "the immanent frame" to explain why believers and unbelievers alike might misinterpret worship. In doing so, this thesis applies Taylor's phenomenological methodology to several casual, popular-level accounts relating to perceptions of God's presence or absence in worship, revealing that the immanent frame does indeed come to bear on the ways in which people understand and experience worship, and suggesting that practitioners must learn to reinterpret worship.

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY PAGE. ii

SIGNATURE PAGE iii

ABSTRACT. iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. v

TABLE OF CONTENTS. vi

INTRODUCTION. 1

CHAPTER 1: IS GOD PRESENT IN WORSHIP? 3

CHAPTER 2: THE IMMANENT FRAME. 21

CHAPTER 3: CLOSED PERCEPTIONS OF WORSHIP. 43

CHAPTER 4: OPEN PERCEPTIONS OF WORSHIP. 64

CHAPTER 5: REINTERPRETING WORSHIP IN THE IMMANENT FRAME. 79

BIBLIOGRAPHY. 91

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, I have been involved in worship ministry in various ways and in various denominations. In this time, I have found that people do not always agree on what is really happening when we gather for worship. Some people believe that God is present among us, and attribute this to their own powerful experiences of awe. Others are skeptical of such perceptions and seem to believe that God is *not* particularly present in worship. Even my own sense of God's presence seems to vary from week to week. How can we explain this? In this thesis, I will explore the conditions that shape our perceptions of what is really happening in the setting of gathered worship, with the intent that Christians, especially people involved in worship ministry, will be able to better interpret their experiences and to discern the presence of God as part of the normal reality of gathered worship. Doing this will require four steps spread over five chapters.

In the first chapter, I survey a multi-denominational variety of people working in biblical and liturgical theology, in order to first demonstrate that belief in God's presence among the gathered church is (or should be) a widespread, normative Christian belief—despite the fact that Christian practices often run counter to this belief. In my second chapter, I describe Charles Taylor's concept of "the immanent frame," outlining the ways that this "modern social imaginary" comes to bear on our sense of self, immanence, and

transcendence. In this chapter, I also describe my own methodology as it relates to Taylor, with the hope that other scholars may apply this same methodology to new areas of research. In the third and fourth chapters, I apply Taylor's concepts to reported experiences of worship, describing the ways in which many people today have come to imagine worship in ways that seem to have been shaped by the immanent frame. In the fifth chapter, I make the case that because the immanent frame has shaped the way in which we worship and understand worship, we need to adopt some new practices that will allow us to reinterpret worship in ways that allow us to better perceive and respond to God's presence among us.

CHAPTER 1: IS GOD PRESENT IN WORSHIP?

Before we discuss God's presence in the setting of gathered worship, it may be helpful to begin by asking the broad question of whether it is even possible that God is somehow more present at some times than at other times. Are there different intensities or modes of God's presence?[1] Is God sometimes near and at other times far? Does our theology have a language for describing God as being present in different ways at particular times or locations? Most importantly for evangelical Christians, what does Scripture say about this?

Christians believe that God is omnipresent—that is, that God is present everywhere and at all times—and consequently that there is no place in which a person could find him or herself somehow outside of God's presence (see Ps 139:7–12). Moreover, we believe that the Spirit indwells believers (see Eph 1:13–14 or John 14:16), and thus we can say that for believers, God is always present in a second way. But God can also be present in other ways. Within both the Old and New Testaments we can see that there are many instances in which God becomes present in tangible ways that are different from his ongoing omnipresence and from the ongoing indwelling of the Holy

[1] The term, "mode" in reference to God's presence is borrowed here from Robert Webber, "Modes of God's Presence," 79–80. In the article, Webber argues that God is, in fact, differently present in gathered worship, as evidenced by Jesus saying, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). It is possible that Webber himself is borrowing from *Eucharisticum Mysterium* 55, published by Vatican II, which describes Christ as being present in four modes during gathered worship: in the gathered people themselves, in the word that is read and explained, in the person of the minister, and in the Eucharist.

Spirit. For example, in the Old Testament we see that God is specially present throughout the Exodus, often locating his presence in time and space (e.g., the terrifying cloud at Sinai, Exod 20:18, or the tent of meeting, Exod 33:7–11). Similarly, after Solomon dedicated the temple, we read that "the glory of the Lord filled the temple" so powerfully that the priests could not go inside (2 Chron 7:1 NIV). Conversely, a key image in Ezekiel's vision was that of the glory of the Lord *leaving* the temple (Ezek 10:18). In the New Testament, the most prominent example is the startling sight and sound of the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), but we also note 1 Cor 14:24–25, in which Paul describes the experience of unbelievers in a worship setting discovering and proclaiming, "God is really among you."

Based on these few examples alone, we can say that Scripture depicts God as being sometimes present in special ways that go beyond his normal presence. The canon of Scripture affirms God as being omnipresent, but we can also see that "Moses does not remove his sandals and hide his face in front of *every* bush that he encounters in the wilderness."[2] God is present in different ways at different times and places. We might describe this in terms of the intensity or nearness of God's presence, or we might say that God can be thought of as being "multi-present" or "present in varying degrees."[3] Whatever terms we use, we must acknowledge that the Christian faith allows for instances in which God is made present to people in ways that are somehow different from his normal, ongoing presence in the world or from the Spirit's indwelling of believers.

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[2] Duvall and Hayes, *God's Relational Presence*, 6.
[3] Wainwright, *Doxology*, 81–82.

We are still left with another question: Does God choose the time and space of a present-day church gathering to make himself present to believers in a way that goes beyond his normal, ongoing presence? For some Protestant Christians, the obvious answer is yes. Within the Pentecostal tradition, the entire worship service is oriented around a belief that God is present to the gathered church in a way that is distinct from the ways in which he is present with individual believers throughout the week. Pentecostal Christians long for God to "show up" within the setting of corporate worship, as seen in the song "Holy Spirit" from Bethel Church in California: "Holy Spirit You are welcome here/ Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere/ Your glory God is what our hearts long for/ To be overcome by Your Presence Lord."[4]

Somewhat counterintuitively, the Pentecostal view has some overlap with the Reformed church traditions in the sense that Reformed Christians also emphasize the distinct, special presence of God in worship—albeit in a different way. For the Reformed traditions, God is perceived as being specially present at the gathering via the doctrine of the "Real Presence" at the Eucharist.[5] It is worth noting here that just as the Reformed traditions would not share the Pentecostal emphases on exuberance and improvisation in musical worship as evidence of the presence of God's Spirit, Pentecostal churches do not believe in the Real Presence at the Eucharist, instead treating the Lord's Supper as a memorial.[6] In other words, Pentecostals might be described as perceiving God as *absent* in exactly the time and space in which Reformed Christians view God as most *present*. The idea that God is specially present in the worship gathering is not at all unique to the

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[4] Torwalt, "Holy Spirit."
[5] Westminster Confession of Faith, 29:7.
[6] PAOC, "Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths," 5.7.2.2.1.

Reformed or Pentecostal traditions, as can be seen in the multi-denominational selection of liturgical theologies below.

Liturgical Theology

Catholic liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh writes that once, worshippers expected to encounter God's Word as a multivalent presence embodied in the corporate liturgical act, but that the advent of the printing press, as well as other enlightenment-related developments, caused people to think of God's *Word* as a set of printed *words*.[7] That is to say, the presence of God in the context of gathered worship was replaced by ideas *about* God, to be read anywhere by anyone. For Kavanagh, the Word can only be authentically interpreted and discerned in the context of the liturgy, wherein people are gathered together in the presence of God.[8] In contrast to various attempts to codify and describe the precepts and ideas to which liturgy might point, Kavanagh views the liturgy as being the actions through which the people become present to God and *vice versa*, adding that God's presence in the gathered church "is not a theological theory; it is a real presence which is there to affect, grace, and change the world. . . God is not present to the worshipping church by faith, but in reality."[9]

David Fagerberg, another Catholic liturgical theologian and a former student of Kavanagh, describes the liturgy as, "that whirlwind of heaven," in which God in some way simultaneously descends to his people and raises them to himself.[10] In the same book, Fagerberg writes, "Liturgy consists of sitting across from God at a festal banquet

[7] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 78.
[8] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 85.
[9] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 15.
[10] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 4.

table."[11] In yet another colorful metaphor, Fagerberg argues that liturgy (that is, the intentional worship of the gathered church) is far more than mere ritual; he argues that in Christ, liturgy "is participation in the perichoresis of the Trinity. We perform the ritual, but Christ noses his way into it, like a camel into a tent, and mystery arrives. Ritual and rubric only arrange the straw in the manger for the mystery's arrival."[12] Whether conceived of as a whirlwind, a dinner partner, or a camel intruding into a tent, God chooses to make himself present in worship. In short, Fagerberg views liturgy as being significant, not because of the history of the ritual and not because it shapes Christians or teaches them something (though these things are also true) but because liturgy creates a setting in which human worshippers encounter God himself and somehow become participants in the mysterious relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit (see John 17:21; 2 Pet 1:4).[13]

This belief in a special presence of God in worship is by no means unique to the Catholic tradition. Robert Webber, a well-known voice in evangelical Christianity, writes that in worship, God becomes available to us as a mysterious presence—one that we cannot understand, yet encounter nonetheless.[14] For Webber, Christ is always present in worship, yet we experience his presence in varying degrees of intensity. This is not because the intensity of the presence itself varies, but because our own openness to the mystery tends to fluctuate; accordingly, the symbolic actions of the liturgy are meant to make us more open to Christ, and to mediate his mysterious presence.[15] Elsewhere,

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[11] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 48.
[12] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 52.
[13] I will return to Fagerberg's re-interpretations of the experience of worship in Chapter 5.
[14] Webber, "Modes of God's Presence," 79–80.
[15] Webber, "Modes of God's Presence," 80–81.

Webber writes, "The church has always believed not only that God is everywhere, but also that he is made intensely present to his church at worship. God is there in the gathering of the assembly, in song, in Scripture reading, in prayer, and especially at bread and wine."[16] For Webber, the fact that many Christians today are not able to discern the presence of Christ at the Eucharist is symptomatic of "the larger process of the desupernaturalization of the entire Christian story at the hands of enlightenment rationalism," an issue I will address in subsequent chapters.[17]

Simon Chan, a Pentecostal scholar, picks up where Webber leaves off, viewing the evangelical church as a church in crisis. This crisis, according to Chan, stems from a poor ontology of the church—one that views the church as a sociological entity, rather than a supernatural entity empowered by the Spirit.[18] Chan is unsparing in his dismal assessment of evangelical worship and ecclesiology, arguing that both are deficient in the evangelical tradition, largely because evangelicals have artificially separated the two. Chan argues that these two subjects (worship and the church) are one and the same, arguing that there is "no separation between the liturgy and the church. To be church is to be the worshiping community."[19] This understanding of the church *as* people gathered in worship is significant in Chan's theology, because he argues that worship is not something that humans do, but something that God does in us. For Chan, worship, and thus the church itself, exists because the Spirit assembles believers together to respond through the Son in worship to the Father.[20] Thus, worship is a response to God, but it is

[16] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 133.
[17] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 134.
[18] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 37–39.
[19] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 42.
[20] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 47.

not our response—it is the response of the Spirit of God himself, and it is this same Spirit who initiates worship in the gathered church. Chan, accordingly, objects to the phenomenon of "'worship leaders' telling the congregation that praise will bring down the glory of God," because he believes that this reverses the actual sequence of events, in which God's presence initiates worship, rather than the other way around.[21] In summary, Chan's theology suggests that we do not need to ask if God is present in worship—the fact that people are gathered in worship already indicates that God is present.

Carrying on a similar theme, John Jefferson Davis, Presbyterian minister and professor at Gordon Conwell, writes about God's presence as the foundational reality of the gathered church. In *Worship and the Reality of God*, a book that blurs the lines between liturgical theology, philosophy, and cultural theory, Davis describes a crisis of disenchantment within evangelical worship. Davis views this crisis as stemming in large part from a poor understanding of the biblical understanding of the church; in contrast, he describes the church of the New Testament as being a "theanthropic (divine-human) reality," that is more than the sum of its property, culture, or history.[22] That is to say, the church exists only to the extent that it is inhabited by both God and people; the church is the temple of God, formed out of the people of God (Eph 2:20–22). By definition, then, all churches are characterized by the presence of God, without which they would not be churches. In this sense, all churches can be described as being "charismatic," in that they are filled with and sustained by the Spirit.[23] Thus, if God is thought to be absent in a worship gathering, this absence is not real, but only perceived. For Davis, the very fact

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[21] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 53.
[22] Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 63.
[23] Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 64.

that Christians are gathering together for worship means that God is present among them. The problem is not that God is absent, but that our "eyes of faith" are not trained to see God as being "really present," though we can be certain that he is.[24]

Here I want to note that the above theologians each acknowledge some sense of a special presence of God in worship—one that is somehow distinct from God's presence in the rest of life. These theologians do not necessarily describe God's presence in the same ways, nor do they relate God's presence to gathered worship in the same ways. Fagerberg, for example, seems to view the liturgy as creating a setting in which God will become present: We build the temple (so to speak) and then the glory of God descends and fills the temple. Chan, though, seems to describe things in the opposite way: God makes himself present (or, the glory descends) and then the people gather around and begin to respond to God's special presence in worship. Exploring the causal relationship between God's presence and the liturgy in each of these theologies goes beyond the aims of this thesis, but it may be enough for now to say that worship happens in a time and space that might be conceptualized as a "human-divine frontier."[25] This concept is Graham Hughes's interpretation of Kavanagh's idea that the church gathered in worship approaches "the edge of chaos."[26]

Whether worship is viewed as the setting in which God descends to worshippers or in which worshippers ascend to God, it is clear that innumerable Christian traditions view worship as a setting in which God and humans become especially present to one another.[27] Hughes notes that every Christian worship service implies this approach (or,

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[24] Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 74–75.
[25] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 149.
[26] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73.
[27] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 150.

the crossing of the human-divine boundary) in numerous ways, most notably through the physical movement of moving forward/inward as the congregation is gathered.[28] Such movements (along with other signs such as prayers, responses, the reading of the word, song, etc.) are described by Hughes as *iconic*, in the sense that they are representations that allow us to imagine another reality. These "icons" do not reflect the imagination of an individual or even a congregation, but the Christian church as whole: "They are the fruit of a long, dreaming—but active, too—wisdom, carried in text, rite, and symbols."[29] The "iconicity" of these signs "depends upon their offering a likeness of how we imagine it might be to see the world from God's point of view."[30] These signs cannot actually *prove* the transcendent reality to which they point, but they nonetheless make it possible for worshippers to engage with such a reality by illustrating both the boundary between one reality and another, and also by making it possible to cross this boundary by gathering as God's assembled people.[31] Thus, worship comprises a human framing of reality, even as it also suggests and crosses over into a divine reality; liturgy (to varying degrees of efficacy) suggests that God is present, but Christian faith believes that God is also ontically present, regardless.

While the above theologians tend to begin with an idea of God, and then attempt to describe liturgy in relation to that idea, it is also possible to work in the opposite direction. In *The God We Worship,* Nicholas Wolterstorff uses liturgical theology to analyze what a given liturgy might imply about God, asking the question, "What would

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[28] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 155–59.

[29] Hughes *Worship as Meaning*, 152. Note that Hughes is drawing his categories from Charles Pierce's work in semiotics.

[30] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 169.

[31] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning,* 170.

God have to be like for it to make sense to worship God in the way that Christians do?"[32] Wolterstorff observes that regardless of denomination or tradition, a great deal of Christian liturgy consists of various ways of addressing God, most notably in prayer; from this we can infer that Christian liturgy implicates God as being both able and willing to listen to his people.[33] Though God is high above—and in some sense even distant—from us, God chooses to listen to our lowly prayers. "Seen from God's side, God humbles Godself; seen from our side, God elevates us."[34] Thus, the time and space of worship becomes a setting in which God and his people meet. What is more, our liturgy implies that God is "listening to what we say when we say it"; this can be taken to mean that God's listening presence is placed within a particular time, in this case, the time of worship.[35] Here, Wolterstorff continues down the path suggested by Hughes, viewing worship as symbolizing or indicating something about God (to borrow Hughes's term, any expression of worship exhibits "iconicity").[36] But, crucially, Wolterstorff explicitly views worship as being a setting of real encounter with God.

Such an encounter with God is dialogical. As Wolterstorff points out, the fact that our liturgy implies that God listens and responds would seem to indicate that God changes, seemingly challenging the immutability and aseity ascribed to God by traditional philosophical theology.[37] This reveals an apparent conflict between our expressed theology and the theology implied by our liturgy, leading to the (intentionally absurd) question: Are we to throw out such central aspects of our liturgy as prayer, or are

[32] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 16.
[33] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 71.
[34] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 77.
[35] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 169.
[36] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 35.
[37] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 169.

we to abandon long-held theological presuppositions about God? In other words, is it possible that liturgy implies the wrong things about God? In order to answer these questions, and to test whether liturgical theology rightly guides us to acknowledge the presence of God in worship, we must look to Scripture itself. Toward this end, I am particularly interested in what biblical theology has to say about God's presence in worship.

Biblical Theology

In their book, *God's Relational Presence,* J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays are concerned about a tendency among Christians to describe God as being *either* transcendent or immanent; they attempt to argue that God is always both, and that holding the two in tension reveals a God who is both omnipresent and present to his people.[38] For Duvall and Hays, the idea that God makes himself relationally present to his people is a consistent "megatheme" throughout the canon of Scripture.[39] Duvall and Hays find ample evidence for their thesis throughout Scripture, and I will only point to a few notable, representative instances here. First, they argue that much of the Pentateuch is concerned with the location of God's presence and with describing the forms of worship that constitute an appropriate response to encountering this presence. Duvall and Hays describe worshipful actions that are done "before the Lord" and stress that in the Pentateuch, the people's worship is "directed not up to a distant God in heaven, but to a very near God living among them in the tabernacle, underscoring the important

[38] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 6.
[39] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 11.

interconnection between presence and relationship."[40] In the writings of the prophets, the presence of God becomes a danger to the people as they turn from worshiping God to worshiping idols, and God's presence departs from the people; but, the prophets also point to a day when God again will be present among his people causing them to respond in worship.[41] In the New Testament, God becomes present among his people again—first in the person of Jesus, and later in the person of the Holy Spirit, who gathers to himself a new worshipping people, creating a community that functions as a new temple (i.e., the new location of God's presence).[42] This new, Spirit-indwelled community is a worshipping community, participating in "prayer and praise as well as the celebration of the Lord's Supper, all of which are experiences of God's relational presence."[43] Duvall and Hays conclude that Scripture describes God's presence as being the foundational reality of worship, that the people's "praise is the ultimate result of [God's] presence," and that "believers encounter God's powerful presence in the worshiping community."[44] In other words, God's presence is the initiating reality of worship, and the community of worshippers that forms as a result then becomes the temporal and spacial location of God's presence on earth.

In *Engaging With God*, David Peterson sets out to establish a biblical theology of worship that will challenge subjective, overly personal notions of worship (e.g.,the idea that worship is primarily a sense or feeling of God's nearness). Peterson thus defines worship as, "An Engagement with [God] on the terms that he proposes and in the way

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[40] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 56–57.
[41] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 164–65.
[42] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 212, 220.
[43] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 244.
[44] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 329, 333.

that he alone makes possible."[45] Whereas Duvall and Hayes describe God as becoming present and thus gathering his people to himself in worship, Peterson begins by describing things somewhat differently, depicting the tabernacle and ark of the covenant as symbolically representing God's presence with his people, and describing the cultic instructions within the Pentateuch as "the protocol by which Israel was to approach the Holy One and to live in his presence."[46] The distinction here is that Peterson views the rituals of worship as being necessary means for *accessing* God's presence, whereas Duvall and Hays view these same rituals as ways of *responding* to God's presence. Elsewhere, though, Peterson reads more like Duvall and Hays: Peterson advocates for a both/and tension between God's immanence and transcendence as depicted in Solomon's temple, where God is simultaneously seen as choosing to reside in the temple, yet also as unconfined by the temple.[47] Peterson devotes most of his book to a New Testament theology of worship, and notes regarding the church that, "God *presences* himself in a distinctive way in the Christian meeting through his word and the operation of his Spirit."[48] For Peterson, the presence of God in worship is strongly correlated with the reading of Scripture. Peterson suggests that Christ is made present and known in his words, and draws parallels between the Israelites gathered to hear the word of God at Mt Sinai and Christians gathered to hear Scripture today, noting that the difference between us and the Israelites is that rather than coming to the place where God has located himself, God "comes to his people wherever they are gathered in his name."[49] Here

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[45] Peterson, *Engaging with God,* 16, 20.
[46] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 32.
[47] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 44.
[48] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 196 (emphasis added).
[49] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 198.

again, Peterson suggests that the rituals of worship (e.g.,the reading of Scripture) precede the arrival of God's presence.

More recently, Daniel Block has written a biblical theology of worship that contrasts with Peterson in some ways. Block is concerned that Peterson committed an error common to evangelical Christianity, which is that Peterson assumes that worship in the New Testament essentially does away with the forms of worship in the Old Testament.[50] By contrast, Block views the believers of the New Testament as relying upon the Old Testament as the source material for their worship, and in many ways as continuing a worship tradition first established in the Old Testament.[51] Thus, Block relies on the Old Testament in order to depict the phenomenon of Christian worship as something that involves actual human action in response to God's self-revelation (as opposed to worship conceived of as purely inward, or personal).[52] Block, taking the depictions of worship in the Old Testament as his guide, views worshippers as people who have been invited into the presence of God (that is to say, they are not people who enter the presence of God by choice or by right, and they are not people who summon the presence of God by their worship).[53] Block also notes that the prophets depict instances in which unholy people do unholy things in the space where God is present, bringing judgement on themselves, and in some cases, separating themselves from God's presence.[54] In the New Testament, however, believers are made holy, and thus able to enter God's presence in worship because of the death and priesthood of Jesus.[55] A similar

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[50] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 22.
[51] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 24.
[52] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 40.
[53] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 72.
[54] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 89–91.
[55] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 97.

continuity between the testaments can be seen in Block's understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, a meal that reprises the Israelite Passover meal and is eaten "in the presence of YHWH," yet which intensifies the Passover meal by presenting the bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus.[56] Finally, Block views Christian worship as being trinitarian, in that all three members of the trinity are present and active in our worship.[57] In summary, Block views worship and God's presence as being strongly correlated, but views God's presence as preceding worship rather than worship itself causing God to become present; here, Block's views are more akin to Duvall and Hays than to Peterson.

This leads to an interesting issue: The theologians above would all agree that God's presence and our worship are strongly connected, but they have differing perspectives on the causality of this relationship (in some instances, authors may even disagree with themselves from one chapter to another). Does God's presence cause people to worship, or does worship create a setting for God to be present? In her doctoral dissertation, Gabriele Braun uses biblical theology to describe a repeated theme in Scripture of God's presence among assembled believers. Braun argues that God is relational, and that this means there is an interactive dynamic between worshippers and God's presence among them. Drawing particularly on Solomon's dedication of the temple and on the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost, Braun suggests that there is a common pattern or "glorious cycle" in Scripture of the praises of God's assembled people leading to the manifestation of God's presence, which in turn leads to more praise

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[56] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 178–79. Block advocates for what he terms a *dynamic* or *spiritual* presence of Christ in the Eucharist, in opposition to either the memorial or transubstantiation views.

[57] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 69.

from the people, and more manifestation of God's presence.[58] Braun points out that the instances of phenomena such as earthquakes, glory, and Spirit-filling in Acts all seem to follow this same pattern. For example, in Acts 4, a gathering of praying believers results in an earthquake and being filled by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Acts 10:44–46 describes the filling of Gentiles with the Holy Spirit, who in turn respond by praising God.[59] Braun summarizes, "Divine presence inspires human praise, and/or human praise initiates manifestations of divine presence."[60] In other words, the canon of Scripture would seem to indicate that God is somehow specially present when his people gather in worship. However, not every instance of praise results in a manifestation of God's presence (or vice versa). Braun describes a number of Old Testament "counter-indications" such as idolatry, injustice, and rebellion that can corrupt the people's prayers and praises, with the result that God does not accept their worship, thus breaking the inter-causal relationship between praise and presence.[61]

Theology Versus Personal Experience

Above, I have demonstrated that the fields of both liturgical theology and biblical theology suggest that God is somehow specially present in gathered worship. There are a variety of perspectives regarding exactly how this happens (i.e., which comes first: worship, or presence?), but overall, it seems reasonable to say that it should be normative to believe that God is present to his people in the setting of worship. This leads to some difficulty in assessing one's own, subjective experience on a typical Sunday morning. If

[58] Braun, "God's Praise and God's Presence," 162–63.
[59] Braun, "God's Praise and God's Presence," 163–64.
[60] Braun, "God's Praise and God's Presence," 222.
[61] Braun, "God's Praise and God's Presence," 196–98.

God is present to his people in worship, why is it that sometimes we seem to experience his nearness, and at other times God seems to be absent? My experience has been that my perception of God's nearness seems to vary. While I have never felt an earthquake or heard a powerful wind blowing through the room during worship, there have been certain times of corporate worship during which I have had a profound sense of God's presence and action within the congregation. At other times I have wondered whether God was present at all, despite holding a cognitive belief that God is near. I doubt I am alone in such experiences.

One way to explain these variations in our perceptions of God in worship is to say that this is one of the many cases in which Christian belief and Christian practice are not one and the same. Wolterstorff writes that while it might be the case that all liturgical scholars would agree that "the enactment of the liturgy is 'a living effective encounter between God and His people,'" most contemporary Christians see the worship service as being considerably less transcendent; for most Christians, we are not hearing from God in the worship service, but only "what some fellow human has to say about God."[62] Here we see a point of considerable dissonance between our theology, which would seem to indicate that God is specially present among Christians gathered in worship, and our experience, which suggests that our worship services are purely human affairs in which God has no discernible presence. Thus, for the average congregant the worship service can become something like a funeral for God in which friends of the Deceased speak fondly of his character and actions in the past and perhaps even mourn his absence in the world today before encouraging one another to live as he lived. In many churches,

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[62] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 127.

Sunday mornings have come to be—or at least to appear to be—*disenchanted*. The question that this thesis intends to ask and to answer is this: Why does our theology of worship suggest that God is present, even as our experience often suggests otherwise?

Conclusion

Above, I have shown that a range of scholars in different traditions and disciplines agree that God is really present when his people gather together in worship, though there are many perspectives on exactly *how* and *when* God is present in the gathering. That God would choose to condescend to us in this way seems surprising, but we can see that this is indeed a legitimate, theological understanding of what happens in worship. This view of God as one who meets his people in worship is not only found in Scripture, but it is an implicit view of all Christian liturgy, whether that liturgy is formal and historic or informal and contemporary. However, Christians are often unaware of God's presence in worship, leading to a sense of apathy toward the worship gathering. Below, I will argue that Taylor's concept of the immanent frame helps us to understand *why* this has happened.

CHAPTER 2: THE IMMANENT FRAME

The concept of the immanent frame comes from *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor. In the book, Taylor sets out to describe the origins and conditions of belief in our time, a cultural moment that Taylor calls "Secularity 3," wherein Christian belief is simply one option among many.[63] Over the course of nearly nine-hundred pages, Taylor charts the changes to the conditions of belief over the past several centuries in an attempt to answer this question: "Why is it so hard to believe in God in (many milieux of) the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?"[64] The resulting book is a multivalent collection that tells the story of how the landscape of belief has shifted in the west over the past several centuries, and describes the forces that shape our ability to believe (or not believe) today. It is important to note that *A Secular Age* is not a history of belief itself; rather the book describes the history of changes to the *conditions* of belief.[65] In other words, Taylor is attempting to tell the story of how people's inward perspectives on the parameters—and even the possibility—of belief have shifted. Thus, even though Taylor is a philosopher writing a philosophical work, the book necessarily involves a wide variety of historical sources (as well as other cultural expressions). These sources are

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[63] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
[64] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.
[65] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

used to create a meta-historical narrative (Taylor openly refers to his story as a "master-narrative").[66] This meta-history is then applied to the conditions of belief in the present day, necessitating a shift from a genealogical/historical methodology to a methodology based in phenomenology.

Because Taylor is not interested in charting how belief itself (i.e., the ideas or doctrines that comprise a particular belief system) might have changed, but rather in how the inner experience of belief has changed, his sources do not include the demographic surveys or doctrinal statements one might expect, but instead include works of philosophy, novels, poems, and historical events. For some, this opens Taylor to criticism that he is perhaps ignoring scholarly accounts that describe the issues about which he is writing.[67] But, it should not be lost on the reader that Taylor is not only writing the history of ideas, but the history of the possibility of belief in those ideas, and for this purpose, scholarly work is not always the most appropriate source (the reasons for this will become clearer below in discussing social imaginaries). Taylor is concerned in particular with background—rather than foreground—information; or, those things that are most likely taken for granted when describing belief.[68] Thus, Taylor counts as evidence any document that reveals—either explicitly or implicitly—what conditions might govern belief in a particular time.

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[66] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.
[67] Walhof, "Politics, Religion and the Spaces of Secularity," 42.
[68] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

Social Imaginaries

A key concept in *A Secular Age* (and a necessary concept before we can begin to discuss the immanent frame) is the idea of *social imaginaries.* In *A Secular Age*, as well as in the earlier *Modern Social Imaginaries*, this term refers to the collective whole of the ways in which people "imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations."[69] In other words, *social imaginary* is the term for the aggregate ways in which the average person thinks of him or herself in relation to others and how that same person imagines the world is supposed to work. Taylor is careful to differentiate his concept from social theory, as a social theory is something created by a small group of experts who are thinking in a "disengaged" way about social realities; by contrast, a social imaginary is "shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society."[70] Thus, while social theory can be communicated through scholarly papers and monographs, a social imaginary is primarily implied and inferred by means of "images, stories, legends, etc."[71] Accordingly, these same images, stories, legends, etc., become primary source material for discovering or articulating the framework of a social imaginary.

Taylor offers us a simple metaphor to illustrate the difference between theory and social imaginary. If we live and move in a certain space, we can mostly likely navigate that space without much conscious thought about how we are able to do so. But, if someone publishes a map of that space, then we have a new way to conceive of the space.

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[69] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.
[70] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171–72.
[71] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

The social imaginary is like the subconscious understanding we have of living and moving in a space, whereas a formal theory is much more like a map, in that it is analytical, logical, and hopefully accurate, but it does not contain within itself the actual experience of having travelled through a place.[72] Still, a map may change the perceptions of people who live in a place if it more accurately describes their lived experience. To insert my own analogy for what Taylor is describing, it may help to think of the experience of a child who sees a globe for the first time, having only ever known flat maps of the world. Suddenly, the rising and setting of the sun and the changing of seasons become much more comprehensible, thus transforming the way in which the child thinks of her surroundings. Taylor writes that theories can sometimes come to penetrate and transform a social imaginary, and that when this happens, "people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory. [The theory] begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken for granted shape of things, too obvious to mention."[73] This too-obvious-to-mention shape of things is the substance of the social imaginary, and is the focus of Taylor's work (and of this thesis).

There are, of course, as many possible social imaginaries as there are people to imagine them, just as there are myriad applications for the concept. For example, one collection of recent scholarship applies the concept to the interactions between Greek and non-Greek groups during the Hellenistic period.[74] Another work examines the effect of linguistic metaphor on the ancient Roman social imaginary.[75] The concept is not only

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[72] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.
[73] Taylor, *A Secular* Age, 175-76.
[74] Stavrianopoulou, *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period.*
[75] Ando, *Roman Social Imaginaries.*

useful for historical analysis, however. One recent paper used the social imaginary as a lens through which to analyze how first-year medical students view themselves in relation to patients and to the medical system, particularly as medicine itself becomes less religious and more humanistic.[76] Another recent paper attempts to explain human environmental impact in Patagonia by reconstructing the social imaginaries of three periods (colonization, 1850–1930; development, 1930–1980; and conservation, 1980–present).[77] In both of these more recent examples, the social imaginary is presented as something that has real impact on the world, in that people act according to their conceptions of themselves in relation to others. Both the historical, analytical approach, and the contemporary, more practical approach are legitimate uses of the concept, as Taylor writes that a social imaginary and the moral order it contains "can either be hermeneutic or prescriptive."[78] Meaning, the social imaginary is the means by which people interpret the world, but also contains within it people's aspirations for the world and thus their ideas of how they should act and what they should do.

The Buffered Identity

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor is concerned specifically with *modern* social imaginaries (modern here meaning "contemporary," as opposed to any modern/postmodern distinction). There are many factors that, taken together, make up the modern social imaginary. One of the most significant of these (both for Taylor and for my thesis) is the concept of the *buffered identity.* Taylor suggests that our concept of the self has morphed

[76] Vazier, et al. "What Does It Mean to Be a Physician?," 76–77.

[77] Archibald, et al. "The Relevance of Social Imaginaries to Understand and Manage Biological Invasions."

[78] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 162.

over time as a part of the seismic cultural shift initiated in the Enlightenment. Put simply, the buffered identity maintains the possibility of "taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind."[79] This sense of the self as being buffered from the world around has many significant impacts for civic and familial life, faith, and so on. One result of this development has been a shift in which people conceive of themselves as individual, disengaged agents who are free to "reform their own lives as well as the larger social order. They are buffered, disciplined selves. Free agency is central to their self-understanding."[80] In other words, because people imagine themselves in relation to others as being separate, autonomous individuals, they also ground all ideas about how they themselves and the world around them might be changed or improved in their own buffered identity. Thus, society comes to be seen as existing for the mutual benefit of the individuals therein.[81] The results of this thinking have included cultural and political emphases on human rights and freedom. Such matters have become so deeply entrenched in our way of thinking that it is difficult to conceive of a scenario in which a person would not imagine him or herself in the same way: "Once we are installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one which makes sense."[82]

The implications of the buffered identity are not only political, but also spiritual. The idea that society is a collection of individuals acting for mutual benefit is a shift from older ideas of hierarchy or differentiation in society. At one time, Taylor contends, society itself implicated God through its hierarchies (i.e., the king, the church, guilds, etc.

[79] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.
[80] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.
[81] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 158.
[82] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 168.

all claimed their authority by some kind of divine right).[83] But now, "the modern order gives no ontological status to hierarchy, or any particular structure of differentiation."[84] Because the modern social imaginary attempts to ascribe equal status and respect to each individual, there is no longer an idea that each person might serve a different role in society. Beyond the obvious examples of monarchies transitioning to democracies, Taylor notes that this means that there is no longer a spiritual hierarchy in society; whereas previous imaginaries conceived of the clergy praying for the laity and the laity working to support the clergy, the modern social imaginary leaves each individual to work and pray (and govern) for themselves.[85] This is perhaps more significant than it appears at first. Taylor writes that previous social imaginaries contained an "ideal order" in which each person served a specific role (including spiritually) and that this order was conceived of as having been designed by God.[86] Thus, the hierarchy of society ("The Great Chain of Being") was a kind of connection to God.[87] By contrast, the modern social imaginary, with its view of society as a collection of individual, buffered selves, has no chain of being. It is a "direct access society" without kings or priests to mediate with anything higher, and so society (and time) become purely horizontal.[88] Thus, there is no time, place, or person that is more sacred than any other or that can grant access to something of greater significance than the individual—there is nothing to mediate between a person and anything higher, be it God, the transcendent, or anything else. The buffered identity, in the context of the modern social imaginary, leads to inherently

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[83] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.
[84] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 165.
[85] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 165.
[86] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 166.
[87] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 208.
[88] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 209.

individualized forms of religion that attempt to connect directly to the divine. Taylor sums up that the morally-driven movement toward individualism (that is, the idea that individual humans have worth regardless of their group affiliation) has contributed to a shift in our social imaginary and the relegation of "forms of mediacy [the church, the throne, etc.] to the margins, and the diffusion of images of direct access."[89] Forms of mediacy become increasingly insignificant as ways of accessing meaning or transcendence. Consequently, as ecumenical structures become diffused, we become "spiritual but not religious," still yearning to connect with something beyond ourselves, but in contrast to previous generations, we have totally reinvented the ways in which we hope to connect.[90] Or, we might say that we have reinvented the settings (time and space) in which we hope to connect.

Disenchantment

Above, I have described mostly the "outward" dynamics of the buffered identity (that is, the ways in which the buffered identity affects our relations to other people and institutions). But there is also an inner dynamic, in which the buffered identity both shapes and is shaped by *disenchantment.* Taylor contends that in the past, people lived in a world that might be described as being "enchanted" in the sense that everything was spiritually charged; the world was seen to be filled with "spirits, demons, and moral forces."[91] But today, our world might be described as being *dis*enchanted, suggesting a sense of loss in having left our enchanted past; "There is an inescapable (though often

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[89] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 210.
[90] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 535.
[91] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age."[92] In other words, the secular age is defined by what it negates or perceives as absent. Taylor argues, though, that the real change has not been so much an emptying out of the spiritual world as it has been a relocation of spiritual meaning and experience; we have determined a new location in which anything of great meaning must be found: our own minds. The disenchantment of the world has meant that we now find that "the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; and minds are bounded so that these thoughts, feelings, etc. are situated 'within' them."[93] So, the story is not so much that the world has *actually* become disenchanted as it is that we have replaced the cults and temples of the past with our own minds as the theater of the divine.[94]

This relocation of the center of spiritual experience and meaning within ourselves clearly reinforces and is enforced by the buffered identity—disengaged from the world around us, we must turn inward to encounter anything spiritual. Whereas humans once thought of the self as being "porous" (that is, open and vulnerable to a world filled with various spirits, deities, and powers), the buffered identity considers the self to be wholly separate from the world outside, including the spiritual world. As an example of this, Taylor describes the ability of the buffered self to view depression as the result of some factor outside of the mind (e.g.,a change in body chemistry).[95] Similarly, the buffered identity determines meaning exclusively "in the mind," that is, "things only have the meaning they do in that they awaken a certain response in us."[96] Accordingly, "The

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[92] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 28–29.
[93] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.
[94] That is, if we are open to such a performance. Much more on the idea of openness to follow.
[95] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37–38.
[96] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 33.

buffered self begins to find the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible."[97] From the perspective of the buffered identity, if there is anything of spiritual significance, it will be discovered, experienced, and affirmed or denied within the mind of the individual.

One result of this has been the advancement of a "frontier of self-exploration" to include religious forms that emphasize self-exploration as a spiritual discipline, so that "the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within."[98] This obviously has major implications for my study of religious experience in this thesis, and I will return to this idea of exploring the inner depths as a mode of spirituality in subsequent chapters. For now, I will point out that self-exploration as a mode of spiritual experience requires authenticity from the individual. Whereas in previous ages, Taylor argues that religious life was "centered on collective ritual," we now encounter a "drive to a new form of religious life, more personal, committed, devoted."[99] Whereas it might have once been considered enough to be counted as part of a society that included membership in the Church, the contemporary believer must be just that: a believer. He or she must be personally committed to belief; and, because the spiritual experience occurs within the mind, it is essential that a person be completely authentic in the experience. In other words, previous, "enchanted" systems allowed for the possibility that a person could him or herself be inauthentic and yet have a real or meaningful spiritual experience or connection, because spiritual meaning was located in various institutions (the church, etc.), rather than within the individual. But the

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[97] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.
[98] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 540.
[99] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 541.

modern, buffered self living in a disenchanted universe has no such external location for spiritual meaning and is left to rely on a sense of personal authenticity to verify and access spiritual meaning.[100] Thus, while priests and kings might have once been perceived as mediating between the people and the transcendent via a divinely ordained hierarchy of spiritual authority, we now mediate experiences with the transcendent by means of our own authenticity.

It would be easy to conflate disenchantment with the decline of religion, but Taylor argues against this. While "enchantment is essential to some forms of religion," Taylor argues that other forms, "especially those of modern Reformed Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant—have been built on its partial or total denial."[101] The process of disenchantment has not so much negated Christian belief as it has changed the form of belief. One prominent effect of this has been the movement toward what Taylor calls "excarnation": the shift from embodied religion to a religion that is experienced and expressed primarily "in the mind."[102] In this sense, Christianity becomes more a set of beliefs and doctrines than a practice; it is viewed as something to be understood rather than something to be lived. While earlier societies saw the transcendent as being mediated through embodied acts and social structures, today "we tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings: of experience, of beauty (we can't really believe that it's telling us anything, unless about our own feelings); even the ethical."[103]

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[100] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 541. This notion of authenticity is deeply tied to what Taylor terms "expressive individualism," a mindset so common to our present culture that he describes us as living in "the Age of Authenticity," 473–504.

[101] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 553.

[102] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 554.

[103] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 555.

The result is that Christianity is thought of as being a set of doctrines or ideas to be dealt with or subscribed to.

The Immanent Frame

Above I have been writing about Taylor's depiction of the social imaginary of our time—that is, the background assumptions that are subconsciously accepted prior to conscious, theoretical thought about our beliefs and our world. Taken together, these ideas make up what Taylor calls *the immanent frame.* The immanent frame comprises a significant portion of our modern social imaginary, and is the natural result of the buffered identity and the movement into disenchantment. The immanent frame establishes yet another background idea in our social imaginary: That there is a "'natural' order, to be contrasted to a supernatural one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent world.'"[104] This developed as a result of a number of theories that came to later permeate the social imaginary, including the efforts of reformers to "disentangle the order of grace from that of nature," and the development of post-Galilean natural science, both of which viewed the universe as operating according to natural laws that do not require God in order to function.[105] The result of all these contributing factors is that "we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order," and that we are able to imagine this self-sufficient order without needing to involve God.[106] This results in a distinction between *Nature* and God, and allows for the possibility that either God is not actively involved in Nature, or even that God does not exist. Thus, the

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[104] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542
[105] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.
[106] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.

immanent frame can “slough off the transcendent.”[107] The word “can” in the previous sentence is essential here. The immanent frame has the ability to slough off the transcendent, but does not always do so, at least not entirely. The frame can be thought of as *open* or *closed.* I will describe what these terms mean below.

First, the immanent frame can be *open*, meaning that although it frames the experiences of life according to the immanent order, it still allows for the existence of the transcendent (or, God). This can be seen in a number of ways. Taylor points out that often people derive their idea of what is good from some sense of a higher order. Thus, the moral patterns and aspirations of society are in some sense derived from and appeal to God (or some sort of higher power). Often, these ideas about what is good or moral are “developed in a profoundly religious context. . . In [a] moment of prayer, or liturgy, or perhaps religious music.”[108] Thus, the idea of good becomes consubstantial with God, such that people “cannot make sense of the good as they experience it without reference to the transcendent in some form.”[109] The obverse of this is that we may also have a sense of loss that indicates an openness to the transcendent; it is possible within the immanent frame to work backward from virtues such as heroism, generosity, etc. and to believe that there must be something higher that informs these virtues.[110] Whether sensed by absence or presence, the immanent frame can remain “open” to the possibility of transcendence.

But, sometimes, perhaps more frequently, the immanent frame is *closed* to the transcendent. Taylor relates this again to the sense of the good or morality in society; an appeal to the transcendent can be viewed as a kind of threat to the moral order. If a

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[107] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.
[108] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 544.
[109] Taylor *A Secular Age*, 544.
[110] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 545.

person is focused on reaching transcendence, then he or she may neglect moral duty in the here and now. A result of this, particularly within some streams of Protestant Christianity, has been a rejection of asceticism in favor of enjoying life as a part of creation.[111] Religious fanaticism thus becomes a danger to the moral order of society, and an enemy of the good (a contemporary example might be Christians who are uninterested in environmental issues, because they believe Jesus will come to rapture them to a new world). But the concern is not only moral, as Taylor writes that there is often a perception that belief in the supernatural actually strips away the sense of awe and wonder in life, offering far too simple and dull an explanation of how we came to be; in other words, within the closed immanent frame, there may be a sense that the existence of life itself is actually more awe-inspiring if there is no supernatural higher power to have created it.[112] So, within the closed immanent frame, there are no mysteries in nature (i.e., there is no creator to be discerned through his creation) but there *is* a sense of mystery around the "dark genesis" of the mind.[113] Thus, there are no supernatural "miracles" in the sense that people tend to think of them; rather it is "precisely the ordinary operation of things which constitutes the miracle."[114]

This notion of the possibility of the miraculous (or, the question of what could inspire awe or wonder) illustrates something essential about both the open and closed iterations of the immanent frame. While the closed frame perceives the creation of a mind (or of life, or even the existence of everyday things) as being a kind of miracle in that it is an awe-inspiring mystery, the open frame allows for the possibility of supernatural

[111] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 546–47.
[112] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 547.
[113] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 547.
[114] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 548.

miraculous acts or events. But, these supernatural miracles can be described as "a kind of punctual hole blown in the regular order of things from outside, that is from the transcendent. Whatever is higher must thus come about through the holes pierced in the regular, natural order, within whose normal operation there is no mystery."[115] So, although it is only the open version of the immanent frame that allows for supernatural miracles, both versions maintain that there is a normal, natural order of things that is not itself enchanted (or otherwise spiritually charged). The open frame allows for the possibility of the transcendent, but whatever higher power might exist does not normally exist within the natural world that we inhabit, and must interject in certain, unusual, miraculous instances. Thus, the natural and the supernatural remain wholly separate in both the open and closed readings; whether reading the frame as open or closed, the perspective from within the frame will always be that if God were to exist, God would be entirely unreachable for those who inhabit the natural world.

If we were to describe this natural/supernatural split in terms of the presence of God, then we might say that within the immanent frame, God is not present. It is possible for someone to have an open frame, in that they believe that God is "out there" somewhere, and even for that person to believe that God might occasionally choose to punch through and to make himself known through some out-of-the-ordinary miraculous event. Or, it is possible (and perhaps more likely) for a person to have a closed frame, and to believe that there is nothing "out there." In both cases, the normal, everyday world is seen to be disenchanted (or perhaps, we might say *un*-enchanted, in that the world was never enchanted to begin with).

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[115] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 547.

Crucially, as I have said earlier about all aspects of the social imaginary, "the immanent frame is not usually, or even mainly a set of beliefs about our predicament. . . It is the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs."[116] It is the background of our beliefs, or the way we unconsciously imagine the world to be before we even begin trying to think about or describe the world. Taylor describes this background as being "something in the nature of a hunch" that determines the direction we might go before we can think logically about our situation or begin to formulate some kind of belief; thus, "both open and closed stances involve a step beyond available reasons into the realm of anticipatory confidence."[117] In other words, before we can believe, for example, that there is a God "out there," we first start with a hunch that there must be something out there (or, that there is *nothing* out there), and it is this initial hunch that gives direction and shape to our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions, and, of course, to the kind of questions we ask about the world.

Inasmuch as the immanent frame *can* be consciously thought about, rather than being unconsciously anticipated, it tends toward the closed reading (acknowledging that in most cases, we are somewhat "cross-pressured" between both readings).[118] Particularly in intellectual settings, there is a hegemony of power that privileges the closed reading as being the "natural" and thus the logically defensible reading.[119] If two people who subscribe to the open and closed readings (keeping in mind that they are unlikely to be conscious of the hunches that inform their perspectives) are in conversation, the conversation is likely to privilege the closed reading as it is the one that can be observed,

[116] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.
[117] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550–551.
[118] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 555.
[119] Taylor *A Secular Age*, 550.

defended, and described within the context of the immanent frame. The detached, disengaged perspective of the immanent frame, whether open or closed, "tends to make us systematically devalue insights which might challenge the understanding of impersonal order, insights which might arise, for example, out of prayer, or in love relations."[120] Instead of these "soft" sources of insight (my expression), we prefer harder sources such as scientific inquiry and reason. Thus, even for those who read the immanent frame as being open, there exists a bias against the sorts of insight and perception that might allow for a sense of the transcendent. God, or the supernatural, is relegated to acting in the world through occasional miraculous interruptions but remains effectively irrelevant to the goings-on of the day-to-day.

An important element of the immanent frame is the epistemology that it stems from and reifies. Taylor writes of an epistemology in which we learn by first knowing the self, then learning in a neutral way about external/natural reality, and finally theoretically ascribing to nature other, higher forces and realities. In other words, we can only know the natural world through our perceptions of it, and we can only grasp the transcendent "by inference from the natural."[121] This epistemology tends to produce certain results, all of which seem perfectly reasonable—so long as the epistemology itself remains unacknowledged and unchallenged. Examining the epistemology shows that "inference to the transcendent is at the extreme and most fragile end of a chain of inferences; it is the most epistemologically questionable."[122] As a result, the epistemology is ill-equipped to seriously consider the possibility of the transcendent, having put so many hazy and

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[120] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 555.
[121] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558.
[122] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558.

subjective lenses in the way. This epistemology leads to a number of different "closed world systems," which are systems of thought that restrict our ability to allow for anything outside of the immanent frame.[123] There are many closed world systems, including the popular concept of the "death of God" brand of atheism, which Taylor views as being uncritical of its own epistemology.[124] Another closed world system is the idea that scientific understanding will result in a conversion to atheism. Taylor writes that such conversions are based in the flawed epistemology projected by the immanent frame, and typically involve a person first choosing to abandon belief, and then finding expression of this newfound disbelief within science (rather than, as the popular story tends to go, being driven to unbelief by scientific inquiry itself).[125] Belief or unbelief (that is, reading the immanent frame as being open or closed) looks out from the position of self-awareness, through the natural world, and then projects or infers the presence or absence of the transcendent from this outlook. The whole epistemology fails if one's own perception of the natural world is incomplete or warped, or if one's self-awareness is faulty.

Methodology

In this thesis, I use Taylor's concepts in order to determine why it is that Christians so often perceive worship in ways that are in conflict with their theology. Accordingly, I will use a methodology based on the methodology used by Taylor to create the concept of the social imaginary. Taylor's concept of a social imaginary is quite distinct from many

[123] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 551.
[124] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 565.
[125] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 568–69.

other related concepts (e.g.,the idea of a worldview) in that a social imaginary is a "largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation. . . [that] can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines, because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature."[126] A social imaginary is mainly conveyed indirectly through stories, songs, poems, and other popular expressions, as opposed to formal academic theories. Taylor writes that as much as social imaginaries make certain practices possible, it is also the case that "practice carries the understanding."[127] In other words, a social imaginary can be perceived and described by reading the subtext conveyed in the common ways that people interact with one another and express themselves. Accordingly, Taylor is omnivorous in his selection of source material. He frequently juxtaposes disparate sources in his attempts to illustrate various facets of the modern social imaginary, including putting Karl Marx in the same paragraph with Romantic painters, or Madonna (the pop singer) in the same sentence with the *New York Review of Books.*[128] Anything from a poem to an election can be considered source material for articulating a social imaginary—the less consciously a source conveys its background assumptions, the more useful it becomes.

In order to make sense of his varied and unconventional source material, Taylor employs a unique version of a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology attempts to interpret the ways in which something is lived out or experienced. As Robyn Horner has written, a phenomenological method begins with the understanding that "we are not only conscious *of* something, but always conscious of something *as* something."[129] Thus,

[126] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.
[127] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.
[128] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 545, 561.
[129] Horner, "Towards a Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Methodology for Theology," 156.

a phenomenological methodology avoids making assumptions or judgements in advance about the ontic reality of an experience, instead attempting to allow the experience itself to guide the questions of research; this attempt to bracket (that is, set aside) the perspective of the researcher at the outset is known as the *epoche.*[130] This detachment leads to descriptions of the methodology as being "atheistic" (or at least agnostic) in that it can only acknowledge an experience as it is observed, rather than acknowledging the outside presence of any transcendent but unobservable being.[131] This obviously creates problems for theologians (or believers in general) who intend to use phenomenology, as one can scarcely set aside a belief in God as an ontic reality. Horner suggests that theologians (and researchers in general) should adopt what she terms a "renewed phenomenology," in which "the requirement for 'methodological atheism' is replaced by a requirement to have an open mind about what might be uncovered in the research."[132] Thus, for example, if the research involves a person's report of meeting God, or of God being absent, the researcher should be open to the idea that the reported experience may or may not be meaningfully connected to the ontic reality of God or God's actions.

Because Taylor is concerned about the background (or conditions) of belief (that is, what it's like to believe something in our time), he uses a phenomenological methodology to describe social imaginaries, including the immanent frame. David Storey describes Taylor's concept of the immanent frame as being focused on "the phenomenological 'lifeworld,' the pre-reflective, pre-theoretical, every day sense of the world that most people share, yet rarely, if ever, explicitly formulate."[133] Clearly, a

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[130] Horner, "Towards a Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Methodology for Theology," 157.
[131] Horner, "Towards a Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Methodology for Theology," 159.
[132] Horner, "Towards a Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Methodology for Theology," 162.
[133] Storey, "Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," 183.

phenomenological methodology is a useful framework for understanding this "lifeworld," but the problem is that Taylor cannot use—or is not interested in using—a strictly atheistic methodology. Indeed, Taylor's interest in the topic is not purely detached, but is in some sense related to his own Christian faith, which he cannot conceive of abandoning.[134] Instead, we might say that Taylor uses a version of phenomenological methodology that could be described as "renewed," to use Horner's term. It is clear throughout *A Secular Age* that Taylor has made no attempt to set aside his own belief within his research, but it is also clear that he intends to be open-minded about exploring phenomena that might or might not indicate God as a transcendent reality. Despite having his own beliefs, Taylor uses phenomenology to set aside the ontological reality of his subject, even a subject who might be distant in time and faith, "in order to describe [their] world from the inside."[135]

Summary of My Methodology

My methodology, based on Taylor's own, is as follows: 1) I have used a phenomenological methodology based on the methodology employed by Taylor in his social imaginaries, wherein the researcher examines popular accounts that may indirectly indicate the conditions of belief. The focus is not on the ontic reality of the object of belief, but on the possibility or conditions of belief within believers or disbelievers themselves.

2) This phenomenological methodology looks to popular sources, rather than theoretical/academic sources, in order to gain information about how it is that people

[134] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
[135] Storey, "Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," 187.

imagine the world around them, their relationships with others, and what they think can or cannot be reasonably believed about the transcendent. As evidence, I am looking for stories of worship experiences in which God's presence is conspicuously absent (e.g., stories using purely immanent criteria such as tradition, sexuality, etc.), or in which God is thought to be present based on criteria derived from the epistemology of the immanent frame (e.g.,someone who perceives God to be present based primarily on a profound sense of personal authenticity).

3) While Taylor further filters and reduces his sources through the lens of his historical/genealogical methodology, I am dealing with strictly contemporary accounts of gathered worship; accordingly, I will reduce and analyze these accounts through the lens of the immanent frame, looking for ways in which the transcendent is assumed to be either present in incomprehensible ways or absent, both of which are potential projections of the frame.

4) Many of these accounts correlate strongly with the outlook implied by the immanent frame, suggesting that many people's experience or perception of worship has been shaped by this same frame, which leads to questions about how Christians ought to re-think the experience of worship.

CHAPTER 3: CLOSED PERCEPTIONS OF WORSHIP

Worship is a strange activity from the perspective of the closed frame. If a person views the world through a closed version of the immanent frame, then he or she determines that there is no God, transcendence, spirit, etc., outside of what we can experience and measure in the physical world. This would seem to make Christian worship an absurd exercise; the closed perspective sees a group of people gathered together singing, praying, confessing, listening, preaching, etc., over nothing. This often leads to a belief that any act of formalized worship, Christian or otherwise, is an act of delusion: wishful thinking at best, manipulation at worst. In this chapter, I will look at a small, representative sampling of some experiences of worship that demonstrate the closed reading of the immanent frame.

Manufacturing Belief

In *The Search: Manufacturing Belief*, documentary filmmaker Patrick Payne recreates his own adolescent experience of a spiritual retreat gone wrong.[136] Using a combination of dramatized reenactments, autobiographical narration, and interviews with a number of

[136] The retreat in the film is is a youth-oriented version of the Cursillo program, a three day, programmed spiritual retreat originating in the Catholic Church, but used in a variety of denominations today.

well-known atheist voices, Payne reconstructs the events of a weekend filled with prayer, singing, and bible teaching, the culmination of which was purported to be a real experience of the Holy Spirit. The cathartic climax of the weekend was an emotionally heightened worship service in which Payne and the other youth found themselves crying, laughing, and singing, as their youth leader told them, "This is the Holy Spirit! Can you feel his love?" Decades later, Payne reflects on this experience:

> It was a shock to the system. I was gonna start crying. I felt right away this sort of adrenaline rush. . . And then for some reason I thought to myself, "Wait a minute. This isn't the Holy Spirit." This felt like it was staged. I kind of felt cheated. . . The final emotional moment of the weekend, the moment that fell short of a real encounter with the Holy Spirit and made me see clearly the fundamental deceit of religion. [The retreat] produces an intense, emotional experience and artificially connects it with the concept of God. Belief can be manufactured by inducing and manipulating moments of awe.[137]

Throughout *The Search*, Payne uses the language of film to great effect as he reconstructs and analyzes the decades-earlier retreat. Payne frequently combines audio from interviews (including a number of prominent atheist thinkers) with video from various sources, giving a new context to both pieces of media. For example, at one point a voiceover from Brian Janssen (a Presbyterian minister) says, "Psychologists have clearly noted that you will slip into a state of suggestibility, a hypnotic state, by constant repetition, repetitious movement, dancing, clapping, chanting." After this, the camera cuts from footage of Christian teenagers singing a praise song ("Jump for Jesus") to footage of Orthodox Jews chanting at the western wall, Buddhist monks making offerings, Muslims circling the Kaaba in Mecca, and so on, as Daniel Dennet begins to describe the evolutionary efficacy of repetitious ritual in religion. This particular

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[137] Payne, *The Search* (film).

sequence ends with footage of pre-historic cave paintings. Thus, the message communicated by combined images and voiceovers is that all religious rituals are really different versions of the same thing; they all work because they trigger some prehistoric part of our brains, and make us feel we are connecting to God (or to gods) when we are really only connecting to our own minds. This is a message that Janssen almost certainly did not mean to convey, yet the images presented re-contextualize his voiceover in such a way that it is hard to imagine him having meant anything else.

In Payne's film, we have an example of how the epistemology of the immanent frame leads to the development of a closed world system, in that Payne fits Taylor's narrative of a person who decides to leave faith based on a kind of hunch, and who later looks to science in order to justify this hunch. In the film, Payne is described as having been somewhat on the fence about his faith to begin with. Then, during the cathartic climax of the spiritual retreat, he recognizes that his emotions are being manipulated, and that he is not having a *bona fide* spiritual experience. This was all at the age of seventeen, but we can infer that Payne spent the following decades looking to the atheist figureheads included in the film so that he can explain his initial hunch, or "sloughing off" of the transcendent. At one point in the film, Richard Dawkins says, "Do not ever accept a belief on the grounds of tradition, or holy books or that kind of thing, or private revelation. Evidence is the only reason to believe anything." Here, we note that Dawkins seems to have a specific idea of what counts as evidence, and that this idea seems to be so *self*-evident as to not need any explanation. If we have Taylor's idea of the flawed epistemology in mind, we might wonder if Dawkins' idea of evidence might need to be examined more closely.

Payne's film contrasts the idea of religious emotional manipulation with the idea of awe. Early on in the film, Sam Harris says, "Awe is a matter of attention, not a matter of the object attended to. It's not an accident that when a Christian begins to feel extremely expansive, let's say in church, he or she will interpret that sudden change in the contents of consciousness or in their emotional life as data in favor of the truth of Christian tradition. . . These expansive experiences happen in every religion." Awe is frequently alluded to in the film as a genuine experience, in which a person becomes aware of something greater than themselves. This can happen in nature (Payne himself describes a feeling of awe in his hobby as an apiarist) but can also happen in religious contexts. Dacher Keltner, a psychologist who studies awe, speaks over footage of choral music being performed in ornate cathedrals, saying,

> When I was growing up, I would do things like, we would be part of a collective gathering and we would sing, and I would tear up, and I would feel connected. I remember some of my early experiences of religion. Of, like, going to a religious ceremony, and they had it all in one place. You go in, you see the stained-glass windows, you sing together, you embrace people, and I would be tearing up, and I had goosebumps.[138]

There is no hint of derision in Keltner's description, nor in the accompanying imagery and music that Payne uses. From the perspective of the film, awe is an essential, important human experience, and one that can be provided by religion. But, per the previous statement from Harris, awe is "not a matter of the object attended to." Thus, awe is presented as a construction of the human brain, as it looks into and marvels at itself. This point, made in throughout the film in various ways by a number of neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers, typifies another aspect of the immanent frame: the relocation of spiritual experience from the world outside to the theatre of our own minds.

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[138] Payne, *The Search* (film).

As I described previously, the nature of the buffered identity is that it is insulated from the world around, and locates meaning and spiritual experience within the mind, leading to self-exploration as a mode of spiritual experience.

As much as Payne's film is critical of the Cursillo retreat that Payne participated in forty-something years ago, the film is also enthusiastic about self-exploration as a kind of spirituality. Near the end of the film, an orchestra swells to a major key as the commentators recount experiences of awe, including various experiences in nature (looking up at the stars, seeing a pod of orcas while kayaking), philosophy (thinking about the brevity and improbability of life), science (understanding the scale of the universe, making new discoveries), and religion (visiting a Buddhist temple, singing a Christian hymn on a particularly nice spring morning). This range of options for finding awe is an illustration of Taylor's contention that we live in the context of "secularity 3" wherein Christianity is one religious option among many.[139] But, really, the film conveys that there is only *one* option with many different faces. Awe is portrayed as the product of attention and does not in any way indicate the possibility of a transcendent reality. Thus, Christianity and the experience of God in the setting of worship (or elsewhere) is seen to be valuable only in the sense that it provides a mechanism for the mind to turn inward. The implicit question that follows is: Why not just visit the Grand Canyon or go for a run instead of having to participate in some outdated, foolish religion? The overall narrative of the film suggests that there is some value to religion, in that it provides a setting for meaningful inward reflection, but this value is limited by the idea that one

[139] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

could find easier access to the same type of meaning in other, simpler, more socially acceptable ways. This is a narrative that we will see recurring in other stories, below.

Sensational Devotion

In her book, *Sensational Devotion*, Jill Stevenson applies cognitive theory and other critical lenses to a number of types of experience in the evangelical world, including movies, theme parks, and megachurches. Stevenson, a professor of Theatre Arts at Marymount Manhattan College, is not interested in the theology of these settings so much as the ways in which these settings work to create visceral experiences for participants (which, consequently, tend to "make" theology).[140] Specifically, Stevens is writing about what she terms "*evangelical dramaturgy*, a system of performative tactics designed to manipulate the physical, rhythmic encounter between user and medium."[141] This dramaturgy includes a variety of theatrical elements, such as sound, light, text, rhythm, etc., but also includes the predisposition of the spectators/participants, and even the bodies of the participants themselves. This last point is especially important, as Stevenson points out that the events she is examining depend upon a relationship between text/performance/audience that is "inherently unstable."[142] That is to say, no one can be a mere spectator in these events; the event depends on the active participation of those who would normally be thought of as the audience (this is easy to imagine when thinking of a typical church service, in which the congregation must perform various aspects of the liturgy, including singing, standing, kneeling, maintaining silence, and so on). One

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[140] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 15.
[141] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 24.
[142] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 28.

implication of this unstable relationship is that the bodies of the audience become media that can be incorporated into the script of the religious experience. However, within evangelical Christianity, there is also an emphasis on *embodied schemata*, ("unconscious maps that emerge as part of our meaningful interactions with things outside of us") as evidence of authentic spiritual experience.[143] Because evangelical Christianity both tends to trust certain physiological data as indicating authentic spiritual experience *and* tends to create rituals and experience that incorporate bodily acts as part of the script, it becomes possible to create "authentic" spiritual experiences by means of carefully orchestrated dramaturgy.[144]

A significant portion of Stevenson's book analyzes the dramaturgy of several well-known American megachurches. For her source material, Stevenson uses a number of studies of religion in America, but she also personally visited a number of megachurches multiple times to observe them first-hand. As an engaged outsider observing from the perspective of academic theory, Stevenson's perspective is quite cynical about the kind of worship that happens in megachurches. She writes that because every Christian church essentially offers the same thing, megachurches must distinguish themselves from their competitors in the religious marketplace by strong branding; this branding is not only aesthetic but relates to the type of spiritual experience that is offered. In order to offer distinct, branded spiritual experiences, megachurches make deliberate use of powerful dramaturgy, which in turn generate distinctive doctrines.[145] In other

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[143] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 28–29.

[144] Contrast this with Taylor's assertion in the previous chapter that Christianity becomes "excarnate" or disembodied as a result of the immanent frame. As will be seen later, these two claims are not necessarily in conflict.

[145] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 162–64.

words, "Churches are not selling a theology, as much as a specific physical encounter with that theology."[146]

There are a number of ways that megachurches create specific, physically-engaging worship experiences. Stevenson describes how a typical megachurch bulletin (if there is one) consists of announcements and opportunities to get involved but does not include an order of service. This accomplishes two things: First, this means that congregants cannot anticipate what comes next in the service—they must simply go with the flow of whatever is happening at a given moment. Second, this frees worshippers' hands so that they can be more bodily present and engaged, perhaps by raising their arms as they sing. Additionally, megachurches tend to use lyrics projected on a screen, rather than singing from a hymnal, allowing for a "'democratic' sensibility that may also reinforce the theological tenet that believers have immediate, unmediated and personal access to God."[147] These same screens also typically include close-up video imagery of the same people who are on the stage (e.g., musicians or preachers), and may also include close-ups of congregants, particularly during emotionally-heightened times of prayer. This simultaneous up-close, projected representation, combined with the reality of being physically in the room with the same person, creates the effect of *hypermediacy*.[148]

Stevenson observes two results of this hypermediacy: First, it allows congregants to see the leaders on the stage as being simultaneously real and larger-than-life. Second, this hypermediacy causes congregants to have powerful "mirror-neuron responses" that "result in simulation."[149] In other words, the scale and closeness of these projected

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[146] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 166.
[147] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 184–85.
[148] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion,* 189.
[149] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 189.

images evokes an emotional response in the viewer, much as watching a movie can evoke an emotional response in the viewer. This is particularly the case when the screens depict a congregant having a visceral emotional experience, perhaps during an altar call or baptism, as these scenes prompt an "emotionally thick motor resonance" in the congregation.[150] Thus, just as churches have a historic practice of writing scripts (liturgies) that involve their congregants, the modern megachurch incorporates the use of multi-media to write a "script" on the bodies and emotions of congregants. This script is so effective that even as an outside observer, Stevenson found herself caught up in the singing, clapping, and swaying in many worship services, creating a powerful sense of belonging to a larger group.[151]

There are two ways I want to think of Stevenson's book in the context of this thesis. The first has to do with Stevenson's own perspective, which exemplifies the closed reading of the immanent frame in a number of ways, but especially in the sense that she is advocating for what would seem to be a far *more* excarnate version of Christianity by casting significant (and credible) doubt on the reliability of the emotional physiological data upon which many worshippers rely.[152] The second way of looking at Stevenson's work has to do with the worship services themselves, which also reflect the workings of the immanent frame (albeit an open reading, at least from the perspective of the worshippers). These gatherings indicate the influence of the immanent frame in a number of ways, including its epistemology (i.e., they rely on a sense of emotionally-oriented self-knowledge as a starting point for making inferences toward the

[150] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 190.
[151] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 199.
[152] This is also an example of how academic writing tends to favor the closed reading.

transcendent). These services also indicate the influence of the frame in their appeal to a kind of unmediated, non-hierarchical spirituality, which depends upon perceived authenticity for meaning. This is catered to in the nature of unison singing, dark ambient lighting that encourages worshippers to have private experiences, and repeated emphases in sermons and elsewhere on having a personal faith and destiny. The nature of the megachurch (or megachurch style) service is to appeal to the impulse to "direct access" spirituality by giving the worshipper a sense of personal control over the experience.

Disengaged Accounts

Payne and Stevenson could be described as "engaged" in their descriptions of modern worship experiences, but here I want to examine the experiences of people who might be described as "disengaged." Many of the people in this section self-identify under the label "spiritual, but not religious" (SBNR). Already, we see the influence of Taylor's buffered self, which leads to the idea that one might practice spirituality without any need for the mediating external authority of the church, the priest, etc. Some who identify as SBNR tend toward an open reading of the immanent frame (we will return to them in the next chapter), but for others, spirituality does not require an open frame (i.e., there does not need to be any kind of a "spirit" in the conventional sense for a person to be spiritual).

In his book, *Listening to the Echo*, United Church minister Tom Sherwood provides a number of insights gathered from 722 interviews with Canadian young adults, many of whom identify as SBNR. Many of the respondents view religion negatively, particularly in the sense that it depends on a higher reality. Sherwood summarizes that his interviewees believe that "Religion is otherworldly and transcendentalist, it does not have

enough to say about the experience of the sacred in creation."[153] By contrast, many of these young people describe spirituality as a kind of inward focus, totally independent of any kind of transcendence or deity. One respondent describes spirituality as "the connection between the physical self and soul," while another says that spirituality "revolves around the idea of well-being and self-improvement."[154] Many describe spirituality in terms of something a person can "feel" emotionally and nearly all emphasize the personal, individualized nature of spirituality, with many respondents echoing Elle, who says, "I choose to be spiritual because I believe in myself, my life, humanity, and fate, but I do not believe in a God."[155]

Many SBNR identifying people have some experience with Christianity, yet report that the faith is not useful to them; there are a variety of reasons given for this, including moral objections, scientific issues, etc. For my purposes, I am interested in people who specifically mention the setting of gathered worship in explaining why they no longer—or have never—believed. Overall, many of these seem to view gathered worship as being boring or irrelevant—a far cry from approaching the "edge of chaos" described by Kavanagh in my first chapter. Sherwood presents a number of stories from people who grew up in the church, but who have ultimately found it boring, concluding that worship is merely a family or cultural tradition, devoid of transcendence.[156] Other respondents continue to find meaning in the church, but purely on the basis of the human

[153] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 19.
[154] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 11–12.
[155] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 17.
[156] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 135, 155–57.

fellowship it provides—some openly disdain the idea that the church requires belief in God for membership.[157]

Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme explore the perspectives of non-religious people in their book *None of the Above*, which combines demographic survey data with first-hand testimonials from "nones" (people who do not affiliate with any religious tradition). Many of these "nones" would identify as SBNR, while others might eschew spirituality entirely. Again, many nones have some background experience with Christianity and have rejected it for a variety of reasons, but I am strictly focused on their perceptions of gathered worship. Put simply, Sunday morning just doesn't hold any transcendent value for many of these, though some say their lack of religious affiliation is less a matter of conviction than it is a sense that they just aren't interested enough to go to church.[158] Kathy, a former Anglican, describes briefly returning to church after her father died, saying that the service gave her a "place to sit and think . . . and so if you want to call that praying, I guess you could, without the distractions of the world around me."[159] Thus, for Kathy, the worship service is defined by its emptiness—it is not perceived as the epicenter of the presence of God among his people, rather, it is the absence of the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

Some of these stories of having rejected the church are not simply stories of a lack of transcendence/meaning or of boredom; some stories are painful, angry, and constitute an active rejection of Christianity rather than a slow fading away. *Empty the Pews*, edited by Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, is a collection of personal, memoir-style essays

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[157] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo,* 157–58.
[158] Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 35–36.
[159] Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 71.

written by people who have left the church for various reasons. A number of these reflect negatively on the experience of gathered worship. One of these, “Selling Out,” by Topher Lin, tells the story of how the author found himself leaving the ardent evangelical faith of his parents. Lin describes how he wanted to be a rock star as a teenager, which in his evangelical subculture meant being a worship leader.[160] Lin formed a band with some other teens from his youth group and learned to play many of the contemporary worship standards from around the turn of the millennium, including “Heart of Worship” and “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever.” Lin describes how songs like these tended to have choruses that repeated indefinitely, a feature his band took full advantage of when their audience seemed to be enjoying themselves. To coordinate when the band would finally end a song, they came up with a sign:

> We’d decided that I as the lead singer would signal when the current round was to be the final one by raising my hand in the air and then slamming it down on the final beat. It was a good system, adding visual flair to the crash of instruments ringing out their final chord, but most of all, it made me feel like a star—up there in front of one hundred worshipful people in charge of the arc of their feelings. All glory to God, of course, not to this sinner, but it wasn’t so bad being the one to reflect that glory on stage.[161]

In time, Lin had serious questions about his own faith, and decided that there was nothing there beyond a worship leader who wanted to feel like a rock star.[162]

Another essay, “Rapture,” by Julie Scheeres, is a reflection on the author’s adolescent sexual awakening in the setting of a fundamentalist Christian reform school. In the essay, every scene is charged with sexual energy, including several worship services where the line between spiritual and erotic ecstasy becomes difficult to define.

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[160] Lin, “Selling Out.” 260.
[161] Lin, “Selling Out,” 261.
[162] Lin, “Selling Out,” 263.

Scheeres describes numerous occasions of watching a young, fire-and-brimstone minister called "Preacher Stevie." Stevie's messages are intense, fervent affairs dealing primarily with the threat of hell, but from the perspective of the narrator and her teenage friends, "Preacher Stevie is a stud who can fill a girl's head with a thousand dirty thoughts when he falls into a frenzy at the pulpit and his muscles start twitching under his tailored shirt and his cheeks flush and he starts breathing heavy, but he's still a man of God."[163] One of Scheeres' fellow students, Rhonda, becomes an ardent believer in this setting, frequently saying that she feels the Holy Spirit. During one evening service, Stevie warns of the coming rapture, as people sing "Take My Life and Let It Be." Scheeres and Rhonda fearfully pray that Jesus will take them when he comes, even while they are gazing at Preacher Stevie. Stevie comes to Rhonda directly, pulls her to himself, and whispers in her ear as she is praying—a close, intimate moment that Scheeres seems to envy. In the end of the essay, we learn that Stevie and Rhonda had been sleeping together, and that Rhonda had become pregnant. Both were cast out of the community.[164] Thus, the lesson we are meant to infer from "Rapture" is that the potent experience of those frightening and ecstatic prayer and worship meetings had nothing to do with the presence of God, and everything to do with the power of teenage pheromones.

Whether angry, disappointed, or bored, the stories above illustrate experiences in which God is not seen as the ultimate reality of gathered worship, with the result that people have left the Christian faith behind. In some of these stories, people have left after finding that there was nothing more to gathered worship than a few boring songs and some old traditions. Others have felt that they were cheated or deceived into believing

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[163] Scheeres, "Rapture," 131.
[164] Scheeres, "Rapture," 140–41.

that there was something significant there, when really all that was there was human vanity or sex. When we think about how these people, and others like them, might imagine Christian worship, we can see clearly the closed reading of the immanent frame. Again, we see the epistemology of the frame, the rejection of the possibility of transcendence, and the exaltation of rational thought. To put things in Taylor's terminology, we might say that the conditions of belief for these individuals were less than favorable. In these stories, and many like them, the closed interpretation of Christian worship leads to an exit from the Christian faith, and a quest for alternative modes of spirituality.

Alternative Spiritualities

In reading through the stories above, it quickly becomes clear that many people view the experience of worship as a kind of escapism at best, and as offering something that could be accessed more effectively in any number of other ways. They might acknowledge that the experience of worshipping with the gathered church has some value, but they could easily get the same value in other ways, without needing to bother with the more problematic aspects of Christianity. If one comes to the conclusion that worship is only one way to access a kind of introspective, spiritual-without-being-transcendent kind of experience, it is easy to take the next step in seeking out better ways to get the same thing.

One example of this move is the formerly-Christian songwriter, Derek Webb. Webb became somewhat well-known as the singer in Caedmon's Call, a Christian contemporary band in the nineties. Later, he struck out on his own, writing songs that

used Webb's evangelical faith to criticize a host of cultural issues. In recent years, after a public, messy divorce, Webb left his faith and released *Fingers Crossed*, a collection of songs about his breakup with Christianity. One of these songs, "The Spirit Bears the Curse," is particularly relevant to my narrative here. The song sounds like a modern worship song, combining an atmospheric synthesizer pad with acoustic guitar, a simple, memorable melody, and a steady, building drum beat.[165] The song structure is like a number of contemporary worship songs, as well, alternating between verse and chorus as the song builds to a crescendo in a final, repetitive bridge. The lyrics incorporate a number of familiar-sounding worship cliches. Even the official video for the song looks like someone typing lyrics into a worship-projection program, complete with a CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) number in the bottom corner of the screen and a stock photo of people raising their hands for the background. A number of comments on the video come from viewers who were at first surprised that Webb now seemed to be making modern worship music, given his former outsider status in Christian music.[166] What becomes clear by the end of the song, though, is that Webb is not making a conventional worship song so much as toying with his audience, as the following lyric excerpt makes clear:

> It's more than chemistry
> More than community
> You enter into me
> You're in my veins
>
> You bear the weight of all our grief
> Uncertainty and unbelief
> Oh, you restore our sanity

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[165] The fact that it is possible for a song to *sound* like a worship song is interesting in and of itself, suggesting the establishment of a contemporary form of sacred music, grounded in genre, rather than ecclesiology.

[166] Webb, "The Spirit Bears the Curse," YouTube video.

So, we raise our voice
We raise an offering
Would you come near
And quench our thirst
Oh, lift our hearts
As the spirit bears the curse

Now my knees are weak
My speech is slurred
Oh, the things you shake
Oh, the things you stir
I am calling out the only name
That delivers me from my guilt and shame
Oh, alcohol
Alcohol [repeat "alcohol" ad infinitum] [167]

The joke is that what seemed to be a modern worship song is actually an ode to alcohol, causing the listener to go back and realize how all of the seeming worship music cliches were actually double entendres about spirits (that is, alcohol) rather than the Holy Spirit. The point of the song is clear: whatever benefits Webb thought he was getting from worship when he was a Christian (the removal of shame, a sense of community, escape from ego), he can now get from alcohol, perhaps even in a way that is more "real" than the perceived illusory, manipulative experience of gathered worship.

In a podcast interview about the song, a guest asked Webb if he really believes that the Holy Spirit and alcohol are interchangeable, or if the song lyrics are tongue-in-cheek. Webb responded:

> If the question is, do I feel like alcohol and the Holy Spirit are synonymous or the same thing, or comparable, I would say, "no, definitely not." But I also, like, at least right this minute, like, I can walk into my kitchen and I can put my hands on a bottle of booze. I know what's in there. I know it's real. I know the literal effect. I'm being a little bit hyperbolic here, but you know, whereas, I'm not convinced that the "voice"—and I'm using air quotes right now—the voice of the spirit that I have heard and trusted and followed, been in tune with, learned to be more in tune with, that I hear in my head, I hear in my imagination, I'm not convinced that

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[167] Webb, "The Spirit Bears the Curse," YouTube video.

> that's not just the sound of my intuition, the sound of my body communicating. And it actually rings a lot truer to me. I always was curious that that voice sounded a lot like *me* to me.[168]

Here, we can clearly see the closed reading of the immanent frame. In Webb's description, the bottle of alcohol is real; it can be touched and tasted and measured. It causes a known physiological response. By contrast, the voice of the Spirit is unknown, unnatural, and unverifiable. The Spirit is unmeasurable, and exists outside of the immanent world, if at all. Webb concludes that the most likely explanation for the times when he believed he was having a spiritual encounter is that he was having some form of inward, self-generated experience, similar to the known, predictable experience of being drunk. Thus, being drunk becomes preferable to experiencing God in worship because it is seen as being more intellectually honest.

Webb's story is perhaps especially angry, public, and dramatic, but his experience is perhaps more common than Christians would like to admit. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, summarizes a recent study of Christianity in America, and finds that while teenagers are among the most religiously active people in America, twentysomethings are the least active. Kinnaman's research indicates that young people are leaving the church in droves, with 59 percent of young people with Christian backgrounds reporting that they have ceased to be active in the church, even as many continue to identify as being "spiritual."[169] The fact that these young people (and it is not *only* young people) are leaving the church in such quantities indicates that they do not find value or meaning in the church, including in the act of gathered worship. Some of

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[168] Webb, "The Spirit Bears the Curse," (podcast).
[169] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 22–24.

these who are leaving remain Christians and have simply decided that the church is irrelevant to their faith (more on this in the next chapter) but others have rejected the idea of Christian faith altogether and have embraced something that might be described as a closed reading of the immanent frame. These, like Webb, are searching for alternative modes of spiritual experience. Webb found a preferable substitute for Christian worship (and for his faith in general) in alcohol, but there are many other religious options available today, even for those with a closed reading of the immanent frame.

In his book, *Sacred Matters*, Gary Laderman (Professor of American Religious History and Culture at Emory University) describes the emergence of a range of religious options that eschew belief in God. For Laderman, religion is not confined to belief in the divine, but is "a ubiquitous feature of cultural life, assuming many expressions though tied to and inspired by basic, universal facts of life and fundamentally biological phenomena in human experience: suffering and ecstasy, reproduction and aging, family and conflict, health and death."[170] The thing that all religious expressions have in common, from Laderman's perspective, is a sense of what is "sacred," a word without fixed meaning but a concept that seeks to explain the unexplainable and to communicate the inexpressible.[171] This idea of religious experience oriented around some "pursuit and experience of the sacred" is expressed, obviously in formal religion, but also in the objects of attention in Laderman's book: "Science and the pursuit of truth, music and the social effervescence at concerts, violence and the glorification of warfare," and so on.[172]

[170] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, xiii.
[171] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, xiv.
[172] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, xv.

Laderman catalogs a representative sampling of particular venues for the new religion in his book, seeking to include any cultural setting in which ritual is used to instill a sense of awe, fear, fascination, etc., that might constitute the sacred; his nine chapters focus on the particular areas of film, music, sports, celebrity, science, medicine, violence, sexuality, and death. Any of these can be seen as presenting an alternative to traditional theistic religion. For example, Laderman's chapter on film describes the experiences of people who find community with others, visceral stories of good and evil, and even a sense of ritual in the darkened theater.[173] Similarly, music unites people around something that defies explanation, and is described as offering "healing transformation and spiritual rebirth."[174] Laderman views many of these alternate forms of spirituality as actually beating religion at its own game. His chapter on sex suggests that sexual experiences can offer something more fulfilling and even more transcendent than what is offered by traditional theistic religion.[175]

Conclusion

I began this chapter by saying that the closed reading of the immanent frame views Christian worship as an absurd activity. This is because Christian worship only makes sense if there is Someone who actually hears and sees and appreciates our worship—an impossibility from the perspective of the closed reading. However, the closed reading of gathered worship goes further than simply disregarding worship as foolishness. From the perspective of the closed reading, Christian worship is not only foolish, but dangerous.

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[173] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, 2–8.
[174] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, 26–27.
[175] Laderman *Sacred Matters*, 146.

Worship is seen to be a deceptive, manipulative act, an act that preys upon natural, physiological responses that are used to coerce people into belief in the impossible. For those who are outside the church, this interpretation simply explains why they are disinterested in Christian worship, while believers remain interested. However, for those who arrive at this position having been in the church, this interpretation leads to a painful process of deconstruction and of breaking away from the church. This process of breaking away is driven, not by any change in the experience of worship itself, but by a change in the interpretation of this experience. Even when worship is viewed favorably (that is, that it offers the opportunity for self-reflection, a sense of awe, morality, etc.), it is always viewed as one of many avenues for achieving the same thing, causing many to ask, “why bother?”

CHAPTER 4: OPEN PERCEPTIONS OF WORSHIP

In this chapter I will look at a number of examples of how people have interpreted worship through an open reading of the immanent frame. These instances can be broken down into two general categories. The first category includes interpretations of worship that view worship and God's presence in terms of the miraculous—that is, the idea of the supernatural briefly punching through into the natural world. The second category includes those interpretations of worship that are technically open, in that the worshippers themselves believe in the possibility of God, but are practically closed, in that God is seen to be external to or separate from the setting of worship. There are, of course, a spectrum of positions in between these two poles, but I am interested in positions that exemplify the extremes, as these are often the most illustrative of the influence of the immanent frame. The significant (and, I think, troubling) thing in all positions is that worship is still being perceived, interpreted, and even constructed from within the immanent frame.

WP Films

Just as I began the previous section by writing about a documentary film that epitomized a closed reading of the immanent frame, here I want to look at two films that epitomize

the open reading, both made by Darren Wilson, a Christian filmmaker who attempts to make documentaries about miracles. The first film, *Holy Ghost*, begins with a dramatic voiceover in which Wilson says, “Some say he’s a figment of my imagination, but the Holy Spirit is real, and I’m going to prove it.”[176] Proving it, in this case, means that Wilson intends to take a camera crew around the world in hopes of catching a miracle on film. To this end, the film is largely comprised of on-the-street scenes in which various evangelists pray for people to be healed or offer prophetic words of knowledge detailing people’s private thoughts. Here, we can already see the immanent frame at work, in the sense of the emphasis on the miraculous (more on this below), but also in the basic idea of “proving” the reality of the Holy Spirit. One imagines that Richard Dawkins and the other commentators from *The Search* would be pleased by this suggestion that there might be hard and fast evidence to be observed and measured.

In the last half hour of *Holy Ghost*, Wilson follows a team of evangelists through the city of Varanasi, India as they put on a series of impromptu, public worship services. One of the evangelists is a singer/songwriter and worship leader named Jake Hamilton. In one scene, Hamilton strums his guitar in a relatively empty square, singing the words, “Holy Spirit come, Holy Spirit stay.” Meanwhile, a voiceover from one of the other evangelists, Mark Marx, recounts, “Jake starts to play, [and] there’s a very real sense of God’s presence descending in that place. A familiar sense of the Holy Spirit. People started to come, attracted by the music, but more by the presence of God. These two young guys come over, and as they come over to me, I see the Holy Spirit on them, and

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[176] Wilson, *Holy Ghost*, (film).

we get into conversation." Conversation quickly turns to prayer, with Marx placing his hands on the two young men as he prays out loud for them to experience God's presence.

The word "presence" is used ten times in Marx's prayer, and even before the prayer, we are told that the point of having Hamilton sing worship songs in a public square was so that God would become present and would draw people to himself. The evangelists acknowledge that people might be drawn to them to hear the music, or to see what the foreign film crew is doing, but they say that the *real* draw will be the presence of God. What is especially significant about this is what counts as evidence of God's presence. In Marx's prayer, he and the young men he is praying for use the word "feel" or "feeling" sixteen times. The obvious, underlying assumption is that the young men will know that God is present because they will be able to feel something. The responses of the young men provide some examples of what kinds of feelings are used as evidence: accelerated heart rates, knees shaking, and a feeling of relaxation.[177] Although any of these feelings could easily be attributed to other factors (e.g., the unusual experience of intimate contact with a foreigner in a public place), in the film, they are presented as clear evidence that God is at work.

This scene demonstrates an open reading of the immanent frame. First, the frame is open because it is believed that God exists and may interact with people. But it is still the immanent frame, because this sort of involvement on God's part is seen to be supernatural, out-of-the-ordinary, or miraculous. This scene also evokes the idea of the buffered identity, in that it locates the center of spiritual meaning within the mind of the

[177] This kind of appeal to feeling is often derided in certain evangelical circles, but consider the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after they discovered that it was Jesus who had been walking with them: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

person having a spiritual encounter. The young men are deemed by the film to be having a real encounter with the Holy Spirit because they feel things, and they determine these feelings to have significant meaning. This reliance on physiological signs demonstrates the epistemology of the immanent frame. These young men know themselves, they have a certain experience in time and space, and they make inferences that what they are told is true: They are having strange feelings because the Holy Spirit is present. This appeal to the epistemology of the immanent frame may or may not apply to the actual experience or perspective of the two young men, but is clearly evident in the way the evangelists understand the situation, as well as in the way that Wilson edits and presents the scene in the context of his film.

One imagines an opposite experience, in which no one felt anything out of the ordinary, and thus everyone could decide that the Holy Spirit was *not* present. Or, we might imagine Payne and the commentators from *The Search* in this scene, possibly feeling some kind of physiological sensation, and explaining these sensations based on their understandings of neurology or sociology, or even based on what they had to drink at lunch. From Taylor's perspective, the assumption that the Holy Spirit is or is not present in this scene comes down to the hunch one brings to it, and is subsequently justified by appeals to religious or scientific ideas. The young men in the scene seem to have been primed to believe they were encountering God (more cynically, we might say that Marx's repetitious prayer provided a script for them to believe they were encountering God), whereas others might be primed to explain what happened in a totally different way.

The second of Wilson's films that I watched was *Father of Lights*. The production value on this film was much higher, but the essential components of the film remained the same.[178] The higher visual quality of this film allows for some interesting visual comparisons. In one scene, Wilson follows an evangelist into "L.A.'s hottest night club." The club is visually overwhelming, with lasers and colored lights beaming though fog. In one instance, we glimpse a live tiger in a cage, followed by a performer hanging upside down from a trapeze, while people dance below her. Everyone in the club is young, attractive, and ecstatic, waving their hands in the air as they jump and dance to the music. The film cuts to a few different evangelical speakers, and later returns, seemingly, to footage of the nightclub. More flashing lights and haze machines, more young, attractive people ecstatically jumping and waving hands in the air. But, it soon becomes apparent that none of the people in this new scene are dancing *together*. Instead, each person has their eyes closed in a moment of personal bliss. This, as evidenced by the later revelation of a modern pulpit made from steel tubing, is not a nightclub, but a Christian worship gathering. In this case, the gathering is the Jesus Culture conference, but similar scenes in the film appear to be actual churches that have taken aesthetic and performative cues from nightclubs (minus the tigers, trapeze artists, and people acknowledging one another). Banning Liebscher, the director of Jesus Culture, talks about how his conference exists to give young people the chance to choose Christianity: "In America, there is a generation that is experiencing more options than any generation in all of

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[178] *Father of Lights* was released two years before *Holy Ghost*, but *Holy Ghost* was filmed over the course of several years, perhaps explaining why the production value seemed much lower on the later film.

history. . . I mean, the ability—the instant access to entertainment and social networks and internet and travel—there are so many options and choices in this generation."[179]

This touches on Taylor's notion of "secularity 3" (the idea that Christianity today is only one option among many), but the visuals here beg the question, what sort of choice is actually being presented to these young people?[180] Aesthetically, it appears to be a choice between having a sensual, overwhelming experience with or without tigers and trapeze artists, with or without acknowledging the presence of others who are having the same experience, and with or without the night culminating with the presentation of a pulpit and a dynamic speaker. The way they appear on film, both the nightclub and the worship conference can be seen as offering essentially the same thing: a scripted experience of awe. This is perhaps an overly cynical take, but in some sense, that is precisely the point. Both the worship conference and the nightclub offer very similar evidence for participants (and thesis writers) to understand what is happening. The difference between how participants perceive one setting from the other has everything to do with the way they interpret these experiences, and I am arguing that the ways in which worship is interpreted are influenced by the immanent frame.

While filming *Father of Lights*, Wilson filmed one particularly strange incident, which he ultimately decided not to include in the final film. In 2018, six years after the release of the film, Wilson released the clip on YouTube.[181] The scene begins with a recollection from Jeremy Riddle, a worship leader at Bethel church in Redding, California. Riddle describes a worship service in which he was not particularly excited

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[179] Wilson, *Father of Lights*, (film).
[180] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
[181] "WP TV Exclusive—The Bethel Glory Cloud," YouTube Video, January 10, 2018.

about what was happening. During the service, Riddle offered up a half-hearted prayer to experience God's glory. After this prayer, Riddle says that a "glory cloud" or a cloud of gold dust began to fill the room and swirl around. Wilson then cuts to video footage of this cloud. In the footage, everyone in the crowded worship service is looking up, pointing, and laughing. The footage is grainy, but it becomes clear that there is indeed some kind of glittery-looking substance sparkling in the air. People exclaim over and over, "Oh my God, Oh my God, wow." At one point, someone brings a flake of the glittering substance up for the camera to see. They set the flake on the screen of a phone, and hold it right up to the camera lens, so close that it is completely out of focus. After several minutes, the video ends with the text of 2 Chr 5:13–14, describing God's glory filling Solomon's temple.

It is not difficult to infer what Wilson might mean by using this passage: The worshippers at Bethel have experienced a cloud of God's glory as a visible manifestation of his presence in worship, just like in the Old Testament. For someone who longs to experience God in the ways depicted in Scripture, this would be a wonderful, reassuring thing to see; this video would be counted as evidence that God is present in worship, just as we read about in Scripture. This video could also be seen to legitimize the kind of worship found at Bethel, as well as reifying the priestly role of Riddle and other worship leaders. One obvious problem with all of this, though, is that the Chronicler describes a cloud of glory that interferes with the ability of the priests to do their work. In Wilson's video, everyone is excited and amused by the cloud, but there is no sense (at least from what can be seen in the video) that anyone would have to stop what they were doing

because of the cloud (it sounds as though Riddle and the worship team continue to play throughout the video, though the music could be pre-recorded).

Thinking of Taylor's description of the perception of miracles within the open reading of the immanent frame, it is easy to see this event as serving to reinforce perceptions of worship as a setting for a miraculous punching-through of the transcendent into the ordinary, disenchanted world. To borrow again from Dawkins' criticism in *The Search*, we might say that this cloud can be weighed as "evidence" that God is present. I am not particularly interested here in trying to prove or disprove the legitimacy of the "glory cloud." Rather, I am interested in the ways that people's reactions to this video can reveal something about their social imaginaries, and how the immanent frame shapes their perception of what worship should be like.

In the comments for the video on YouTube, a wide variety of perspectives can be found. Many, as might be expected, find the video wholly unconvincing, reflecting a closed reading of the frame in remarks comparing the cloud to a cheap magic trick or to a drug-induced hallucination. Others reflect an open reading, yet are skeptical of the cloud, suggesting that it was fabricated by the leadership of Bethel Church and that this fabrication does harm to Christianity; most of these comments seem to come from believers who indicate that though they believe in God, they simply cannot believe that God would do something like this. However, there are others still who reflect a different sort of open reading, in that they see the cloud as a genuine miracle indicating that God has punched through into the world of the (otherwise godless) natural. All of these comments, whether positive, negative, or absurd, serve as examples of the importance of the "hunch" that informs the direction of belief. People generally already know what they

want to believe before they watch the video, and then, having watched it, they justify their hunches by appealing to some higher sense of authority, be it science, theology, Scripture, etc.[182]

God Has Left the Building

Just as Wilson's films suggest God's presence in worship as evidenced (that is, perceived to be evidenced) by various miraculous signs, we can also observe instances in which believers conclude that God is not particularly present in the setting of worship, due to a perceived lack of evidence. In time, this perception tends to result in a person deciding that church (or at least the experience of gathered worship) is not particularly relevant to their faith, even as they may continue to believe in God, Jesus, and so on.

In *The Meaning of Sunday*, sociologist Joel Thiessen combines data from surveys with personal interviews to find out how Canadians think about religious services. One interviewee, Larry, was raised in the Anglican Church, but did not regularly attend worship services as an adult. This changed when Larry's wife passed away, but only for a short time. Otherwise, Larry attends his church each Christmas and Easter because of "the ritual of the songs. . . the carols. The rituals, being all there with family on Christmas Eve." Larry is wary of extreme forms of religion, and prefers to pray alone, saying "I will say a quick prayer. . . I'll feel my father with me. . . on my bicycle. . . I'll ask him for a push up a hill."[183] Rose, another interviewee, describes a similar affiliation with the

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[182] I am not at all immune to this; I had an idea of what I expected to find when I watched the video, and everything that I saw in the video confirmed my presuppositions. Then, I justified my pre-existing hunch by thinking of theological, psychological, and scientific concepts that would explain why my hunch was right. In some sense, writing this chapter is also an expression of the immanent frame.

[183] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 68–69.

Catholic Church, saying that she attends occasionally because she likes to sing the songs and because it makes her grandmother happy, but she finds actual spiritual meaning by praying alone as part of her daily yoga practice.[184]

Notably, Thiessen records interviews with some "marginal affiliates" (people who attend church only once or twice per year, yet still identify as believers) who describe a sense of God's presence in the setting of worship. Thiessen writes, "Though most interviewees believe that they can connect with God anywhere, Fran Wright's sentiments resonate with many in this study: 'I feel a closer connection. . . when I'm actually in the church. . . or a chapel or whatever. . . It might sound funny, but it just feels more holy.'" Thiessen correlates this statement with research indicating that "80 percent of Christmas-only attenders attribute religious significance to the Christmas services that they attend," but concludes that the fact they do not attend more often than once per year casts doubt on these reports or on the significance of sacred connections in general for these people.[185]

In *Listening to the Echo,* Tom Sherwood records a number of similar anecdotes, in particular when he interviews people who have grown up in the Presbyterian tradition. One interviewee, Erica, was highly involved in her Presbyterian church but decided to conduct an "observational objective experiment" by exploring other religious practices. As a result, she still identifies as a Christian, and says she believes in God and Jesus, but has chosen to incorporate a number of spiritual practices she has learned from Buddhism, resulting in an idiosyncratic religious practice: "I hold a lot of views and beliefs from different backgrounds and interpret the meaning of life in more of a personal relationship

[184] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 75–77.
[185] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 80.

with my God, rather than congregationally sharing my faith."[186] Andrew, who describes his Presbyterian faith as being an important part of his identity, says "I can be characterized rather easily by the term 'sprinkle Christian,' as it is a very rare occasion in which I attend church. This, however, is not, in my view, a failing; rather, as Martin Luther proclaimed five centuries ago, to attain salvation, we need only have faith in Jesus and God. I have both, and am thus satisfied with my religious practices."[187]

Another of Thiessen's interviewees, Wendy, might be described as SBNR. She identifies (sometimes) as Christian, and says she believes in God, but also says that God does not intervene in human affairs. When Wendy's daughters became involved in Young Life, she became concerned that they might be involved in a cult and started attending herself. Wendy reflects, "It seemed to me that it was a whole lot of just worship. . . There was no critical thinking in it, no understanding of why this was a group of teenage kids who were, at that time, you know, they're trying to figure out who they are, what they are, and it seemed to take advantage of that in not a good way."[188]

These experiences indicate that even though these people subscribe to some version of the Christian faith, they do not see church attendance—more specifically, the worship gathering—as being particularly relevant to their faith. Rather, if these people want to have a meaningful spiritual experience or encounter with God, they are likely to pursue a private spiritual practice (e.g., yoga, meditation, time in nature). This fits well with the broader SBNR movement; even if these people identify with the Christian faith, we can see that the ecclesial hierarchy and traditional structure of the faith is not

[186] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 159–60.
[187] Sherwood, *Listening to the Echo*, 161.
[188] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 102.

particularly meaningful to their own spiritual practice. Thiessen describes a movement even among those who are "active affiliates" to rely primarily upon one's own beliefs and perceptions rather than trusting the beliefs and teachings of the church or the ministers, a movement that is intensified among marginal affiliates. For these people, the church, its teaching, and its worship are not viewed as authorities that inform spiritual life so much as they are seen as resources to be combined with other resources (family, culture, personal beliefs and practices, etc.) to create a personalized religious practice.[189] In other words, even for active affiliates (and more so for marginal affiliates), the worship gathering is one spiritual resource among many, to be curated according to the needs of each worshipper individually. In short, we see here the influence of the immanent frame in the movement away from hierarchy and mediacy toward personalized, inward-focused religious options. One result (or, depending on your perspective, one cause) of this is the perceived absence of God in the worship gathering.

This sense of God's absence (or perhaps I should say, this *lack* of perceived presence) is more pervasive in the church than it might at first seem to be. Kinnaman's research indicates that roughly one in five young Christians in America report that "God is missing from my experience of church."[190] Another survey shows that roughly half of American Christians across all ages are "tired of the usual church experience," while one in five report that they seldom or never experience the presence of God in worship services (Kinnaman adds a disclaimer here, saying that negative experiences are typically under-reported in this type of research).[191] This is a theme that bears out in the anecdotal

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[189] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 63–64.

[190] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 116. Notably, the same survey reports that 31 percent of young Christians describe worship services as "boring."

[191] "Five Trends Defining American's Relationships to Churches," February 19, 2020.

evidence collected from Thiessen's Canadian, active affiliates, as well. In Thiessen's interviews, there are a number of people who describe gathered worship in ways that seem oblivious to the idea that God might be present. For example, one interviewee, Stephen, is deeply committed to his church and to his faith, but describes his beliefs about religion as being "primarily individual," and says that the purpose of gathering with other believers is for Christians to "test and validate their religious attitudes and behaviors."[192] Another interviewee, Elizabeth, says that attending her Pentecostal church is very important to her, because she has friends at church who support her and because she can learn about God at church, which allows her to grow closer to God in her own practices of faith.[193] Edward, a Catholic Christian, describes the importance of gathering for worship as being like "Alcoholics Anonymous," because humans are social animals and need the support of others to continue practicing their faith.[194] These statements are all true, to varying degrees, but the presence of God is conspicuously absent from these descriptions of why the Sunday morning gathering might actually matter to believers.

Here again, we can see the evidence of the immanent frame in the sense that the worship service is described in purely immanent terms. The anecdotes throughout this section have described the usefulness of the worship service in terms that could easily be applied to any other sort of social gathering: The worship service succeeds (or fails) based on how well it allows Christians to build relationships with one another, how well it trains or equips Christians to live out their faith, or how holy-feeling or awe-inspiring the service and its setting might be. The same (or similar) criteria could be applied to

[192] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 35–36.
[193] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 38.
[194] Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 58.

concerts, civic ceremonies, schools, and other non-theologically-oriented settings without needing to ever consider the question of God's presence, let alone his existence. These may all be worthwhile criteria for evaluating a worship service in some ways, but the absence of references to the presence of God as a central reality in gathered worship is a jarring break from the theologies of worship presented in the first chapter and is clear evidence that Christians interpret the experience of gathered worship through the immanent frame. These descriptions of worship appeal to strictly immanent understandings of what happens in gathered worship by emphasizing the natural while capitulating to the natural/supernatural divide, thus relegating God to some space outside of the "real" world. Though none of these descriptions demonstrate the same sort of wild appeal to the supernatural found in Wilson's films or in some more supernaturally-oriented streams of Christianity, they still reflect the same assumption that God is absent from the normal course of events in everyday life, and thus that if God ever should intervene in our world, it would be in the form of the miraculous: an out-of-the-ordinary punching through of the supernatural into the natural.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen a number of descriptions of how believers perceive worship. These believers are open to the possibility that God exists, but differ in how active they imagine God to be in our world, particularly in the setting of gathered worship. Some believers perceive God as being present in the setting of gathered worship, and they look for supernatural or physiological evidence to support this belief. Other believers have not seen this sort of evidence (or they have rational reasons to distrust it) and have thus

concluded that gathered worship is not important to their faith. The use of this kind of evidence demonstrates a way of thinking about God, worship, the church, and the natural world that has been shaped by the influence of the immanent frame. The appeal to supernatural signs (or the lack thereof) demonstrates a perceived natural/supernatural divide, which is a product of the immanent frame and its disenchanted view of the natural world. The appeal to physiological evidence as the sign of God's presence can also be seen as evidence of the epistemology of the immanent frame, which prioritizes self-knowledge as its foundation. This same use of physiological evidence also demonstrates the importance of authenticity as a key factor in determining meaning in a spiritual setting. However, the fact that many people do not feel that gathered worship is an important component of their faith and have chosen other spiritual practices, instead, demonstrates that this appeal to authenticity is also a rejection of other forms of mediacy, and demonstrates that God is not perceived as being the ontic center of worship.

It is clear that there are a number of problems with the ways in which Christians (and non-Christians) interpret gathered worship, particularly regarding the presence of God. I have been arguing in this chapter and previously that Taylor's concept of the immanent frame gives us a way of describing the system of thought and perceptive lens through which Christians view the experience of worship. This warped perspective has led to a variety of conclusions about God's presence or lack thereof in gathered worship, many of which are in conflict with normative Christian theology. If we are to recover an awareness of God's presence as the fundamental reality of worship, we will need to find new ways of reinterpreting the experience of worship from within a culture that has been bent and conformed to the immanent frame.

CHAPTER 5: REINTERPRETING WORSHIP IN THE IMMANENT FRAME

One aspect of the immanent frame that has become clear in my research is that its perspective-altering influence is so pervasive that it becomes difficult to imagine any other way of perceiving the world. As Taylor writes, "Once we are installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one which makes sense."[195] Not only is the immanent frame incredibly pervasive, it is also too obvious to be seen by those who live within it; the epistemology of the immanent frame makes it difficult for someone within the frame to examine his or her own perceptions with any kind of objectivity. And, of course, the immanent frame is not one single issue or way of seeing the world, but is a complex system of interrelated concepts that reinforce one another in myriad ways. Given this pervasiveness and complexity, what means do we have for confronting the influence of the frame on our worship?

As I wrote in Chapter 2, it can happen that new theories (or, in this case, theologies) might eventually come to permeate a social imaginary, but this can take centuries and may never happen at all. Taylor wrote that, more than theory, "it is practice that carries the understanding," and so the more effective way to challenge a social

[195] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 168.

imaginary is to introduce a new practice that embeds within itself a new understanding.[196] What is significant for my study of worship is that Christian worship is a practice (or collection of practices) that *already* has embedded within itself a new understanding that confronts and undermines the immanent frame, as can be easily seen in the writings of the liturgical theologians cited in Chapter 1. What we are lacking is not new practices, but new means of understanding the practices that we have inherited; the problem is not so much our practices themselves as it is with our interpretation of them.

To this end, I am concerned with how worship practitioners can begin to reinterpret the experience of worship, even as it is actively being misinterpreted due to the immanent frame. If practitioners can recognize that both they and their congregants have come to view worship through the lens of the immanent frame, I believe they can begin to challenge their own interpretations and to provide means for new interpretations of worship and of God's presence therein. This will require that worship practitioners begin to think of themselves explicitly as worship *interpreters.*

The Worship Leader as Interpreter

I have written above about "liturgy," but I have generally been directing my thoughts toward the rituals of "low" evangelical worship gatherings, many of which practice a somewhat unconscious or informal liturgy, reflecting a democratic, non-hierarchical sensibility, and which is largely facilitated by the relatively new ministerial office of the worship leader.[197] I want to suggest here that we should reconsider at least part of the

[196] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.
[197] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 18.

worship leader's job description (and, by extension, the role of *everyone* who is involved in worship ministry).

Specifically, I believe that rather than thinking of themselves strictly as worship *leaders*, people who are involved in worship ministry (clergy and lay alike) should begin to think of themselves as being, in part, worship *interpreters*.[198] I am not so concerned with the term we use for the role as I am with what the role is trying to accomplish. A worship leader is concerned with leading people to have a particular worship experience.[199] The leader has a sense of what should happen in the service, how people ought to act, and of the practical means by which people can be led to do these things. There is a connotation of control inherent in leading worship, not only in the term "worship leader," but in the actual practices and duties inherent in the role. This is particularly easy to observe in a negative way: If Sunday morning is an unpleasant, unsatisfying experience in some way, it can be assumed that the worship leader has not succeeded. More pointedly, we might assume that if the worship leader were not to show up, then worship would not happen. Thus, the worship leader is viewed as being responsible for making worship happen, and making it happen well (or, at least, for creating the ideal conditions for worship to occur).

The implications for the worship interpreter are quite different. An interpreter is responsible for helping people to access the meaning of something but has no causative relationship to that thing. This is analogous to the role of a museum docent or forest

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[198] This idea first entered my consciousness in Sandra Van Opstal's, *The Next Worship.* Van Opstal first learned to think of worship leading as interpretation in the setting of Latin American churches, but argues that interpreting worship is pastoral obligation for *all* worship leaders, 203, 170.

[199] The use of "experience" as a replacement for "service" is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself, and would be an interesting topic to study. Many large, contemporary churches today focus on creating memorable or one-of-a-kind worship experiences—a decidedly loaded way of describing Sunday morning.

ranger, both of which teach people to understand and engage with something that they themselves do not possess or control. The worship interpreter recognizes that God is present in gathered worship and makes it his or her business to become attuned to the signs and details of God's presence so that others may become able to perceive God's presence and action, as well, with the end result that they may respond to him in worship. Interpreting worship within the context of the immanent frame requires that the interpreter be aware not only of God's presence, but also of the distorting effects of the frame on the perceptions of congregants, as well as on the interpreter him or herself. There are many possible areas of focus here, but I am interested in focusing in particular on the issue of mediacy and hierarchy in the church and on identifying the slow signs of God's presence.

Mediacy and Hierarchy

The immanent frame's rejection of mediacy is a significant issue for worship, particularly if we accept Webber's assertion in Chapter 1 that the symbolic actions of worship serve to mediate the actual presence of Christ.[200] One key way that God's presence is mediated to people is in, through, and around the rituals and sacraments that comprise gathered worship. This is not to say that these elements are like talismans or spells that compel God to be present, but that they are means of grace by which God has already mediated his presence to the church. Here, it is helpful to return to Hughes' use of *iconicity* from my first chapter. Hughes describes the acts that comprise worship as being iconic, in that they are representative of another reality. "Iconic signs," writes Hughes, "invite us to

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[200] Webber, "The Modes of God's Presence," 80–81.

imagine how things are in the presence of God."[201] Thus, in worship it is "*as if* we come into the presence of God."[202] But, worship goes beyond metaphor or symbolic imagery—worship is more than imaginary. The iconicity of the signs of worship helps us to better imagine and participate in that which faith tells us is actually happening.

Davis continues a similar line of thought by suggesting that the actions of worship function as symbolic signs of the reality of God's presence, but that these same signs also allow worshippers in some way to participate in and access this same reality. In other words, the actions of liturgy are not *only* symbolic, but function semiotically—they are signs and guideposts as we journey towards perceiving God's presence among us.[203] To use an analogy that is closely connected to Christian liturgy, a wedding is filled with signs that indicate the union that is taking place in such ways that the betrothed as well as their audience can meaningfully access and participate in an otherwise abstract reality. This means that the signs that comprise a wedding ceremony are (ideally) not simulations of marriage, but iconic symbols that provide access and allow people to interpret and participate in the invisible but very real union that is taking place.

Because the immanent frame rejects forms of mediacy, it also rejects hierarchy with regard to spirituality. This is because the traditional hierarchy of the church, with its clergy, lay leadership, and so on, is seen as being itself a form of mediacy, presenting barriers between the individual and the experience of God (as seen in many of the stories in Chapters 3 and 4). This is a significant problem for Christian worship, in that it delegitimizes the actual practice of worship in many ways (again, note Wolterstorff's

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[201] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 151.
[202] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 154.
[203] Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 106-7.

observation that we may hear a sermon or other proclamation from a church leader and believe we are only hearing "what some fellow human has to say about God," rather than God himself.) [204] Practically speaking, someone has to choose the songs, read the Scriptures, pray the prayers, preach the sermons, preside over times of silence, and start or end the service. This may be a group of people, and may be done entirely by laypersons, but there is a kind of inherent, unavoidable hierarchy to these acts, and to fully dispose of this hierarchy would be to dispose of the gathered worship altogether.

This rejection of hierarchy stems from the natural/supernatural divide, in that it assumes that there is nothing at the top or bottom of the hierarchy other than our fellow humans, and that these humans can only be barriers to our direct-access notions of spirituality. However, if we truly believe that the church is a divine-human entity, it becomes possible to conceive of a different kind of hierarchy. Fagerberg describes a hierarchy in which the leadership of the church exists not to control people or to restrict their access to God, but one in which the purpose of the hierarchy is to dispense grace and facilitate praise: "Hierarchy exists for the purpose of agape descending creatively and glorification ascending eucharistically: hierarchy is a liturgical thoroughfare. And the reason for every being in the hierarchy—both heavenly and earthly—is to pass love from Creator to creation, and glory from creation to Creator."[205] This hierarchy of love and glory stands in sharp contrast to any other *arche* we might find in the world; it is "a *hierus-arche*, a priestly power," and it is Christ's kingly high-priesthood that we have

[204] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 127.
[205] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 34.

been grafted into.[206] In other words, the hierarchy is good news, and is directly connected to the church's *raison d'être*.

Of course, it is possible (and all too common) for the hierarchy of the church to be corrupted, particularly when the leaders of the church begin to think of themselves as being comparable to the leaders of purely human organizations. The Quaker educator Parker Palmer describes this tendency as "functional atheism, the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God." Palmer writes that one symptom of this tendency is that a group becomes unable to tolerate any prolonged silence, believing that if we aren't busy making noise, nothing is happening.[207] It is possible for people, worship practitioners in particular, to act as though everything depends upon their own efforts, and to mistakenly believe that if they do not do *something*, nothing will happen. This results in the severance of the intended continuity of the hierarchy of the church, and makes ministers ends unto themselves—wielders of human power and authority (as seen in the story of Topher Lin in Chapter 3).

I want to suggest three preliminary steps toward interpreting worship in light of the mediacy and hierarchy of gathered worship. First, practitioners should think of themselves not as democratic representatives in a human institution, but as people who have been endowed or burdened with the awe-full, terrifying dignity of being part of the kenotic, grace-receiving, praise-giving hierarchy of Christ's church. This does not mean they are leaders in the humanist sense, deciding what the people should do and hear and

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[206] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 36.
[207] Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 88–89.

think, it means that they are servants in the priestly sense. They pass on to the people the love that they themselves have received from Christ, and they facilitate the people's praise-filled response to God.

Second, the means by which they are to do this are through the human-divine synergistic acts that comprise our worship. This necessitates a careful consideration of what elements might belong in the liturgy, but, even more so, it necessitates an appreciation for the presence of God within whatever elements are already present. This may even necessitate a new emphasis on those elements of liturgy in which the worship interpreter has little real control, such as silence, confession, testimony, the prolonged reading of Scripture, etc.

Third, practitioners must be aware that congregants regularly enter the setting of worship with little sense of what they are doing or why; in response, it will be essential for practitioners to explicitly help people to grasp both the signs and the ontology of worship so that the liturgy can function in an overtly mediatory way. On this point, it may be helpful for ministers to frequently, perhaps briefly, explain what is happening when people participate in the liturgy. This might be done by asking questions throughout the service. For instance: What does the call to worship tell us about who we are as believers? Why is reading the Scripture aloud in the community significant, compared to reading at home? What does it mean to discern the presence of Christ in the Eucharist? The central concern behind such questions and teachings is not merely to recognize God's presence in the gathering, but to then respond to him in worship.

Slow Signs

The question I have been circling for some time in this thesis is this: How can we learn to better discern the presence of God in worship, despite the numbing, perspective-altering effect of the immanent frame? Above I have given many instances in which the immanent frame has destabilized many of the kinds of evidence Christians and non-Christians alike might appeal to (e.g., a sense of authenticity, a sense of awe, a rational appeal to the immanent world, or even the perception of the miraculous). Note that here is some sense of immediacy in all of these signs—they all depend upon how we see things *right now*. While it will be difficult (if not impossible) for worshippers to check the immanent frame at the church door, it may be possible, even within the frame, for congregants and ministers alike to focus on the signs of God's presence that are not so immediate.

I want to suggest that worship interpreters should pay close attention (and help congregants to become attentive) to what I am calling the *slow signs* of God's presence. By slow signs, I mean those signs of God's presence that cannot be observed in the moment but that become visible over longer periods of time: weeks, years, and even lifetimes. Slow signs (in contrast to such "fast" signs as miracles, angelic visitations, prophetic ecstasy, etc.) are normal works of God that reveal God's ongoing presence in the lives of individuals and congregations. These include the development of faith, the growing understanding of God's word and character, loving and forgiving one another (1 John 4:12), the development of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), the confession of creedal truths (1 John 4:15–16), overcoming sinful tendencies (Rom 8:9), the rejection of forms of idolatry (2 Cor 6:16), an awareness of adoption by God rather than slavery or fear (Gal

4:6). Based on the liturgical theologies explored in Chapter 1, we could even say that the very act of gathering for worship is a sign that God is present to the church. These are not (generally) the dramatic, awe-inducing, heart-pounding signs that the epistemology of the immanent frame induces us to seek, but they are nonetheless legitimate signs of the presence of God among his people.

Fagerberg compares liturgy to an estuary, describing how we may not be aware of the mixing of salt and fresh waters under the surface, but we can learn to recognize the sight, sound, and smell of the life that surrounds these waters.[208] Similarly, we may not be able to see the below-the-surface reality of God's presence in our midst, yet we can see that, in time, spiritual life abounds in and around our gathered worship. That these slow signs all involve some kind of transformation is particularly important in light of the self-knowledge that forms the basis of the epistemology of the immanent frame. If we are paying attention to the slow signs, we may find that as we behold God in worship, we begin to change as a result. Thus, the epistemology is turned on its head in the sense that we come to know God in the context of the worshipping community, from there we begin to understand the ontology and teleology of his creation, and finally, we begin to make inferences as to our own identities (or, our own identity). If we begin to discover that people in the congregation are changing over time, we are left with little choice but to believe that *something* is happening, and that this something defies the categories imposed by the immanent frame. Something is happening under the surface—the waters are mixing. Here, liturgy functions semiotically, giving us some way to understand and

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[208] Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 30. Fagerberg presumably has in mind here the specific, historic liturgy of the Catholic Church; whether fairly or not, I am applying his thoughts on liturgy to gathered worship in general, including the informal–possibly anemic–practices of worship found in the spectrum of evangelical churches.

describe what is happening as we observe changes in ourselves and others over time. But, liturgy is not only indicative or symbolic of these changes; gathered worship is actually a setting in which these changes occur. The rituals that make up our gathering do not only indicate that God makes himself present among the church—rather, the gathering becomes a time and space in which God is truly present among the church, and we cannot help but respond in worship.

Conclusion

I have been arguing throughout this thesis that the immanent frame has changed the way in which believers and unbelievers alike interpret their experiences of worship and of God's active, living presence therein, and that we must relearn how to interpret our experiences within this context. I have been particularly concerned with what all this means for worship practitioners (that is, worship leaders, pastors, and so on), in part because this thesis was driven by questions emerging from my own ministerial practice. If I have been accurate in my presentation of Taylor's work, and if I have also used my phenomenological sources fairly, then I believe my conclusions regarding how we ought to begin the task of reinterpreting worship hold real merit. The point of all this has not been to say that those involved in worship ministry should become experts in cultural or secularization theory (let alone phenomenology), but to say that such issues can and do come to bear on our faith in such significant ways that we cannot afford to ignore them.

I have suggested above that we might begin to reinterpret worship by renewing our understanding of the mediacy and hierarchy of the church and by becoming more attentive to the slow signs of God's presence. I believe these suggestions have immediate

application in my own ministry, but in some sense, I think I am only beginning to study the influence of the immanent frame on worship. There is much more to be learned, and more questions to be answered. I cannot help but think this thesis has only briefly touched on so many issues that ought to be examined more closely. How has the informal evangelical liturgy been shaped by the immanent frame? And, how should this liturgy be revised? How has the immanent frame come to bear on the way that we preach and hear preaching? In the midst of denominational differences surrounding the meaning of the Lord's supper, are there ways in which the immanent frame has warped our understanding and practice, and can we somehow recover a truer way of celebrating the Eucharist? Is it possible that the immanent frame has shaped what might be called the "worship industrial complex"? If so, what needs to change? These, and many more questions are all wrapped up in the idea of interpreting worship, and I suspect, will come to shape my own ministerial practice in years to come.

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