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# Idolatry

## *Looking for Joy in All the Wrong Places*

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*"There is still a small amount of light in human beings. Let them walk, let them walk on, so that the darkness doesn't close in on them."*

—Augustine, *Confessions* 10.33 (trans. Ruden)

Even if our goal is to foster joy and focus on the practices that nourish it, we need to be aware of cultural conditions that inhibit joy. To foster joy we need to recognize the hurdles and barriers to joy. For many, joy almost seems like a luxury—a privilege denied to many by a host of material conditions that inhibit the realization of that blissful rest from anxiety we sometimes name “joy.” If joy is elusive, and the light of joy has been eclipsed in our societies, it is mostly because of environmental inhibitors that undercut basic human flourishing: the way poverty gnaws away at peace; the way wealth corrodes contentment; the way racism and sexism denies dignity and protection; or the way inequalities of power generate oppression and vulnerability that devour the psychic margin we need to experience joy. The material baseline for

flourishing turns out to also be the material baseline for joy. So if we want joy, we should pursue justice.

And yet, there remain many who can take for granted this material baseline—those for whom these environmental affordances for the possibility of joy *are* in place—who nonetheless experience despair, sadness, and a kind of fundamental, subterranean anxiety that robs them of joy. There is a dis-ease that char-

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acterizes youth, reflected in astronomical rates of mental health treatment and increased suicide rates. Dismissing this malaise as “influenza” is not a response; it is a condescending evasion. But what’s the inhibitor here?

We want to consider what might seem an almost scandalous possibility: that *idolatry* should be numbered among the inhibitors of joy. That puts us on the terrain of *worship*: what we devote ourselves to, what we give ourselves over to, what we entrust ourselves to with the hope of satisfaction is at once what we worship and what we want. Our worship shapes our wants, and our wants find expression in our worship. So could it be that one of the inhibitors of joy in our secular age is idolatry, i.e., false worship?

Now, we want to immediately address a likely question or concern: Isn’t including idolatry as an “inhibitor” an instance of blaming the victim? To describe young people suffering from anxiety and despair as “idolaters” hardly seems like a constructive or compassionate approach. Isn’t this kind of judgment only likely to deepen their alienation and disenchantment?

This, of course, is not at all what we intend by considering idolatry as an inhibitor. The point isn’t denunciation; it’s diagnostic. Our idolatries are less conscious decisions to believe something false and more like learned dispositions to hope in what will disappoint. Our idolatries are not intellectual, they are affective—instances of disordered love and devotion. Idolatry is caught more than it is taught. We *practice* our way into idolatries, absorbed from the water in which we swim. Hence our idolatries often reflect the ethos of our environments. That’s why

this isn't a denunciation of adolescents; if anything, it's a critique of we adults and older generations who've created the world they've inherited. If young people have absorbed an idolatry that frustrates joy, it's because we've built an environment that nudges them in that (disordered) direction.

To name idolatry as an inhibitor is not to wag our finger at young people in judgment, but to specify the theological and spiritual nature of this inhibitor. To name idolatry as a source of despair is to remember that some spirits can only be exorcised with prayer and fasting, so to speak. Here is an inhibitor that requires more than a therapeutic or structural response. Indeed, this is precisely why youth *ministry* matters. Youth ministry tackles this challenge on the register of the heart and its devotions, offering young people an unapologetically *theological* diagnosis and, even more important, holding out the spiritual disciplines and worship of the body of Christ as an invitation to give themselves over to the One who gave himself for them. In this sense, being invited into the Spirit-ed rhythms of Christian worship is to learn to love again. And reordering love is capacity-building for joy.

## Joy, Love, Worship: An Augustinian Account of the Good Life

We believe that a fifth-century African bishop offers assistance as we grapple with these twenty-first century challenges. Augustine shares a fundamental conviction of the *Theology of Joy and the Good Life* project. For Augustine, there is an intimate connection between joy and “the good life.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of the distinguishing markers of the happy life found in God is a joy and delight that could not be achieved otherwise—a rest and contentment that stems from *being found*. The absence of joy—what Augustine describes as a state of “restlessness,” a

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1 Or “the happy life” as he would call it, echoing ancient, particularly Stoic, formulations.

frantic, besetting anxiety—is a symptom that one has not achieved or rightly aimed at the good life. In this sense, Augustine can be read as an ancient theologian of joy, for whom the unique rest that accompanies delight is a marker of flourishing. The “authentic happy life,” Augustine concludes, is “to set one’s joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you. That is the real thing, and there is no other” (*Conf*s 10.22.32). Those found by God find in him “the joy that you yourself are to them.”

Augustine’s account of joy and the “happy life” provides a framework to understand the existential dynamics of idolatry, because he braids together joy, love, and worship. Appreciating this interdependence of our love, worship, and joy is the way to then understand why disordered worship (idolatry) leads to disordered love which then generates unhappiness and despair.

Like Springsteen, Augustine would say that everybody’s got a hungry heart. But what we crave is *rest*. “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>2</sup> This insight in the opening paragraph of the *Confessions* is echoed at the very end of Book XIII: “‘Lord God, grant us peace; for you have given us all things’ (Isa. 26:12), the peace of quietness, the peace of the sabbath” (13.35.50). The soul’s hunger for peace is a longing for a kind of rest from anxiety and frantic pursuits—it is to rest *in* God. And for Augustine, to find this rest—to entrust ourselves to the one who holds us—is to find *joy*. “In your gift we find our rest,” Augustine concludes. “There are you our joy. Our rest is our peace” (13.9.10). Joy, for Augustine, is characterized by a kind of quietude that is the opposite of anxiety—the exhale of someone who has been holding her breath out of fear or worry or insecurity. It is the blissful rest of someone who realizes they no longer have to perform; they are loved. We find joy in the grace of God precisely because he is the one we don’t have to prove anything to.

The same phenomenon of human desire is considered from a different angle in *De doctrina christiana*. There Augustine emphasizes that the human heart can’t not love something ultimately. To be human is to

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2 Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1.

be a lover, and to be a lover is to look to something as ultimate, as the source and end of the happy life. Thus Augustine articulates this in terms of *enjoyment*. What you *love* is what you “enjoy” insofar as you look to it for ultimate satisfaction. “Enjoyment,” he says, “consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake.”<sup>3</sup> What you love is what you look to for joy, for ultimate satisfaction that gives rest from your striving.

But here Augustine introduces a crucial distinction, because not everything we try to enjoy can actually yield lasting joy. He points out that not everything *deserves* to be loved/enjoyed in this way precisely because not just anything can actually satisfy our hungers. Thus he articulates the *ordo amoris*, the “right order of love” that delineates a normative account of what *ought* to be loved or enjoyed as ultimate. So he expands his definition of enjoyment: “Enjoyment, after all, consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake, while *use* consists in referring what has come your way to what your love aims at obtaining, *provided, that is, it deserves to be loved*.”<sup>4</sup> Not everything deserves to be enjoyed in this way because not everything can stand up to the infinity of our longings. Indeed, nothing created can bear the weight of our love precisely because their corruptibility means they will pass away.<sup>5</sup> “Among all the things there are, therefore, those alone are to be enjoyed which we have noted as being eternal and unchanging, while the rest are to be used in order that we may come at last to the enjoyment of the former sort.”<sup>6</sup> All of creation is to be received as an iconic<sup>7</sup> gift that we “use” in the sense that it points or “refers” us to the immortal, infinite

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3 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 1.4.4.

4 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, emphasis added.

5 Most poignant case: death of his friend in Confessions IV: loved one bound to die as if we would never die.

6 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.22.20.

7 Jean-Luc Marion’s distinction between the idol and the icon can be helpful here.

Creator.<sup>8</sup> “The ‘things’ therefore that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in fact the Trinity, one supreme thing, and one which is shared in common by all who enjoy it.”<sup>9</sup> This right order of love and the distinction between use/enjoyment will be a way to reconsider what’s at stake in idolatry.

## You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Idolatry as Joy Inhibitor

So, for Augustine, joy is the rest that is found when we devote ourselves to the One who, for the joy that was set before him, gave himself for us. We find joy when we look for the satisfaction of our hungers in the Triune God who will never leave us or forsake us, when we find our enjoyment in an immortal God whose love is unfailing. That is rightly ordered love, and it is rightly ordered worship/devotion.

But how does this help us understand idolatry?

First: idolatry, on this account, isn’t just a problem because it’s “false” worship, on the register of truth, or merely a transgression of a commandment (though it is both). Existentially, the problem with idolatry is that it is an exercise in futility, a penchant that ends in profound dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Idolatry, we might say, doesn’t “work,” in a sense—which is why it creates *restless* hearts.<sup>10</sup> [At some point need to make the point that believers are not immune (per Book 10). Idolatry is a constant temptation of the *Christian* life as well. Indeed, as Jean-Luc

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8 For Augustine this “use” is not merely instrumental; it can be attended with its own, rightly ordered/ranked enjoyment or delight (Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.33.37, 1.35.39).

9 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.5.5. I’ve put ‘things’ in scare quotes because Augustine goes on to point out that, of course, God is not a thing among other things.

10 Augustine’s account of the restless inquietude of the human heart is the catalyst for what Heidegger would later call *angst*, which has now woven its way into our popular lexicon.

Marion observes, conversion only heightens this trial and the burden of selfhood; see *In Self's Place*, pp. 145ff.]

Second, Augustine provides a diagnosis of just what's going on in idolatry: we are enjoying what we're supposed to be using. We are treating as ultimate what is only penultimate; we are heaping infinite, immortal expectations on created things that will pass along; we are settling on some aspect of the creation rather than being referred through it to its Creator. Augustine describes this using the metaphor of a journey: disordered love/worship is like falling in love with the boat rather than the destination.<sup>11</sup> The problem is: the boat won't last forever, and is going to start to feel claustrophobic; and your heart is built for another shore.

But we need to recognize that such disordered loves/expectations are not always consciously "chosen"—not "intentionally," at least. They are often *caught* more than they are taught. Indeed, they are absorbed from the liturgies that we give ourselves over to. Our idolatries are less a manifestation of our conscious rebellion and more like the lazy defaults we fall into.<sup>12</sup> This is why our idolatries and disordered loves/expectations can't be adequately analyzed in terms of individual "beliefs." Instead, it requires something more like an environmental analysis of our culture's *liturgies* (which is exactly what Augustine does in *City of God*).

Disordered liturgies instill in us habits of disordered love and expectation. At root, these disordered liturgies train us to enjoy what we ought to be using; to look for ultimate fulfillment from what is only penultimate; to foist upon aspects of creation what only the Creator could return. And since the earthly city is characterized fundamentally by pride and love of self, that means that most of our disordered

11 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.4.4.

12 See, for example David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 2009). In this commencement lecture first given at Kenyon College Wallace points to the invisible (like water) structures of our experience that we take for granted, but which can become idols.

liturgies are variations on a theme of self-reliance and fetishizing our own autonomy. Thus, as Jean-Luc Marion has suggested, the idol is often a mirror that returns our own gaze (unlike the “window” of the icon that we see—and are seen—through).<sup>13</sup> This might go a long way to explain how and why our own cultural liturgies generate a heightened self-consciousness that mitigates joy. It’s to an analysis of one of these contemporary liturgies that we now turn.

## Contemporary Analysis: Idolizing on Instagram

What are the idolatries young people have absorbed? We’d like to briefly home in on social media as a case study. As parents and youth workers know firsthand, social media is a valued dimension of young people’s lives, which is why they spend so much time on their devices.

In our work with high school and college students, we have found Instagram to be a key social platform that young people use and one that seems to inhibit joy in a particular way.<sup>14</sup> There is something about Instagram that grips young people.<sup>15</sup> Prima facie, we could ascribe this to the image-based culture of Instagram. Surely young people must find this attractive. After all, Instagram seems to be the home of the

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13 Jean-luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd. ed. (*Religion and Postmodernism*) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 11, 12.

14 Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter certainly are used by young people and can have negative impact. But these other platforms seem to be more easily “shed” than Instagram. See, for example, Leah Shafer, “Social Media and Teen Anxiety” in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, December 15, 2017: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/12/social-media-and-teen-anxiety>.

15 On the demographics of Instagram users, see, for example, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>. On the steady increase of Instagram use among young people projected until 2021, see <https://techcrunch.com/2017/08/22/teens-favoring-snapchat-and-instagram-over-facebook-says-emarketer/>, accessed August 3, 2018.



“selfie.”<sup>16</sup> But fixation on selfies (and a simplistic association with selfishness) can distract us from a more fundamental question. Instagram is all about *presentation*, and the most basic question is: what do I want when I present myself in this way? And what does such presentation do to us? Does it foster joy? Or quite the opposite?

When asked if she gets anxious at any point using social media, a student noted that she does especially when using Instagram. “[I get] anxious about [the] number of likes [I get],” she said. “I have notifications turned off so it’s only when I check a few times a day . . . [It’s a] very low level [kind of] anxiety . . . I usually tell myself it’s pointless.” When asked what exactly brings this anxiety she answered, “How many of my followers like my pictures, percentage of total [likes], [and] getting more likes than the last picture.” Another student put it this way. “I would definitely say that Instagram can have a negative effect on me. I try to follow accounts that are uplifting and inspiring, but I inevitably compare my appearance, my experiences, and

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Presentation.  
Presentation.  
Presentation.

my lack thereof to the people and photos I see.” The placement of features matters. Likes and comments are the first option viewers have. And one has to wonder what Instagram users are being set up to anticipate and hope for when they encounter the filter feature immediately after they take a photo—the “gatekeeper” they must pass *before they can post* their image or video.

What’s the big deal, though? Aren’t there bigger fish to fry in the domain of idols? Instagram is just a mole hill, right? Apparently not. When asked if any of these platforms affect the joy they have in their lives, and if so, how, one student responded “Instagram—I don’t know if I would say my joy is lost in those moments, but I feel inadequate, or rather I feel like I’m not doing enough, I’m not receiving enough out of life. So

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16 Of course, this “selfie” culture could be taken cynically: Christine Rosen, “Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism,” *The New Atlantis* 17, Summer 2007, 15–31. In Augustinian fashion, we are looking for the longing.

maybe that is stolen joy.” Another said, “both [Instagram and Facebook] affect the joy in my life. I took a year to abstain from social media altogether, and it was a very peaceful and freeing season of my life. I think social media intensifies the opportunity to compare myself and my life to others, making me feel discouraged or lacking when I don’t match up. Also people only project their best selves and the life they want to have so I’m constantly comparing myself to an ideal and unrealistic life.” Young people clearly experience anxiety, and sometimes anger, when they turn to this platform. And these experiences of anxiety and anger are often movements in response to failed expectations and realized disappointments. They were hoping for more likes than they received. Aiming for more followers than their peers. Comparing those viewing their videos to how many followers they have. On many levels, their interaction with this medium and others on this medium subtly and causally works against the joy that they are ultimately seeking.

The constant pull to present. The ever-present impulse to compare and evaluate. The acutely felt experience of inadequacy after one has unwittingly or wittingly done this. All of this takes its toll on young people. It isn’t simply what the user brings to this platform. The cause of anxiety and anger doesn’t only lie with young people. It’s the dynamic of using Instagram. It’s the unique features on offer that invite and encourage these movements. It’s exhausting, yet young people have a difficult walking away from it. They are aware of their restlessness, yet they continue to give themselves over to it. Their restlessness seems to come in two forms. There is the restlessness that comes from constantly feeling the need to present oneself like everyone else and there is the restlessness that comes from seeking affirmation from others through likes and comments. There is the restlessness that comes from posing seventeen times for the same picture before getting it right. Then combing through all of the filters, writing a witty caption, and choosing the right hashtag. And then there is the restlessness that comes from putting oneself out there in the promiscuous picture with “duck lips” and a low tank top that needs to get more than two hundred “likes.”

This restlessness is rooted in young people's response to felt anxiety and anger.

The anxiety young people experience on Instagram doesn't only manifest itself in online presentation, though. It takes another form. Though keenly felt, this one is not so easily detected. Hear the words of one student. "I get super anxious at times when I'm on both social apps [Instagram and Facebook]. Every time I click on them, I am reminded of the time I'm wasting, sometimes I don't care, and other times I internally freak out because it's almost like an addiction. *I get anxious that I am not present*, but sometimes I remain on the app just out of compulsion. It's kinda scary" (emphasis mine). She continues. "I get anxious that I am wasting my time because while I'm on the app, *I could be paying better attention to the people around me, or the place I am in*. It's really distracting to me also because it interrupts whatever I am doing all the time. I could pick up my phone for a reason like searching something on the web that I need to know for homework, etc, and all of a sudden my fingers are clicking the social apps and scrolling, and I lock my phone without even accomplishing my intended task. I get mad at myself sometimes for those reasons, like I don't feel in control because I'm so automatic with technology" (emphasis mine).

While there is the experience of anxiety in presenting oneself on Instagram, as already discussed, there is another form of anxiety young people experience when they aren't presenting themselves online. Yet it is related to *presentation* in general. This we might call the anxiety of "being-presented-as" to others face-to-face when one is online. This "being-presented-as" is not to be confused with the anxiety that some young people experience when they realize that they are missing out on something, typically known as "FOMO." We might throw "FOMO" under the more general category of "being present." This fear of missing out has to do with the unsettling realization that one is not getting all that one could be getting or doing or experiencing all that one could be doing or experiencing. The anxiety of "being-presented-as" works differently. It is not so much about being present as it about being absent. There are two sides to this "being-presented-as." In one of its

manifestations, one is unsettled by the realization that one is not “there” for another even though one is right next to them. She experiences herself divided as she is present to others online but absent to others physically proximate to her. Then there is “being-presented-as” as being roped into the perception or judgment of another. The sense that one is being seen, watched, objectified, and evaluated even.<sup>17</sup> This is the uneasy feeling that one is being judged as one is online.

The anxiety and anger that young people apparently experience on social media, particularly Instagram, should clue us into the idolatrous movements being made on these platforms. Idols are present and idolatry is being practiced. In particular, young people struggle to not give themselves over to the culture of presentation that is invited and encouraged by the features and use of these platforms. They struggle to not pursue perfection and prize affirmation through likes and views. They struggle to deal with not achieving omnipresence when they attempt to be “present” online to friends and sorority sisters who just posted a pic and are awaiting “likes.” They struggle to balance between presenting themselves online, “being present” to others offline, and “being-presented-as” while online. Many young people (and their elders!) have fallen into the trap of putting too much faith in themselves, too much hope in others, and too much love in appearance. For all of the satisfaction and enjoyment that Instagram can bring, it can foster just as much dissatisfaction and restlessness. Instead of inviting users to look beyond themselves, by its subtle patterns and practices of “gramming” and the features it offers, users experience the invitation to use this platform as a source of security and relief. Ironically though, as we have been indicating, this platform becomes a source of suffering that at the very least, deters or defers joy, and at worst, inhibits it. During adolescent years and possibly beyond.

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17 What Charles Taylor calls the dynamics of “mutual display” in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 481–85.

## Liturgies of Hope

If idolatry—disordered loves and expectations—is a joy inhibitor that generates anxiety and restless, robbing young people of the joy that attends that *rest* we find in a gracious God, then only a theological and spiritual response will adequately address this inhibitor. This is how and why youth *ministry* could be a beacon of joy: precisely by retrieving the disciplines of the faith and the liturgical practices of the church, and especially welcoming adolescents into the multigenerational body of Christ, learning how to love, and enhancing capacity for joy/rest.<sup>18</sup> Youth ministers are at the front lines of reprogramming young people's use of platforms.

Youth ministers don't need to be clued into how social media works. They are on the front line of this. They deal with this every Wednesday night as they try to gather middle schoolers for icebreakers or keep high schoolers attentive during Bible study. But if we are to minister to the needs and longings of young people in our congregations, we would do well to carefully consider what expectations a given platform cultivates and if these expectations work against the very joy of life in the Spirit that we are trying to cultivate. We would also do well to consider that we have resources at our disposal—the rich liturgical practices and spiritual disciplines of the Church. We would like to propose icon viewing and meditation as two spiritual disciplines that can help youth resist idolatry in our digital age, and thereby mitigate the anxiety and anger that inhibits their joy. While the Ignatian Examen could help young people pinpoint aberrant desires that they bring to their practice of “gramming” and the Jesus Prayer—or the repetition of a Psalm—might help them calibrate their focus and attitude as they approach social media in general, what young people seem to really need is a renewed sense of what to see and how to see. Icon viewing and meditation are two disciplines that directly attend to these goals.

18 See, for example, Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, eds., *Way to Live: Practices for*

*Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002).

It might seem odd to some to refer to the viewing of icons as a spiritual *discipline*. In prominent streams of Christianity, such as Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism, icon viewing isn't a discipline *per se*—it's a given. It's a gift. It's a means to communion that is a part of the Christian's life and worship. But there are basic disciplinary elements (i.e., instructional components) to icon viewing that should be highlighted and appreciated. An icon is seen. One has to look at it. The fact of the matter is the eyes could go elsewhere. Something else could be seen instead of the icon. We could spend our lives looking at other visible things besides icons. So we have to discipline ourselves to look at icons, whether we are at home, church, work, or school. We have to walk up to them and plant our eyes on them. So in this sense, our eyes have to be taught to look. And our feet have to be taught to move toward them. And our minds have to be taught the importance of all of this. We have to teach ourselves this through the process of icon viewing. All the while recognizing that the icon itself teaches us too.

Though visible like other things, the icon isn't just an image. It isn't a portrait or a picture. Whether it's the Pantocrator, John the Baptist, Mary with Child, the Resurrection, or Noah's Ark, an icon points beyond itself. True, an icon does tell a story. And we need to recognize the power in seeing the gospel story portrayed in images, as early Christians like John of Damascus did. Icons disclose what has been done and what is to come. They are alternative visions and visuals of reality that are already but not fully. And seeing this is important. If we hear a language spoken long enough, we'll start to pick up on it. If we eat certain foods long enough, they start to affect our digestive system. If we gaze at certain images long enough, they start to shape our vision of the future and perception of the now. But icons don't merely tell a story. An icon carries the viewer beyond the image (and ourselves) to a vision of truth and reality.<sup>19</sup> An encounter, actually. An icon puts us before the gaze of

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19 As Jean-Yves Lacoste poetically puts it, "The things which one uses liturgically [e.g., bread, wine, cup, candles, *icons*] occupy a space which is not that of geometry but a lived space, and a space which envelops us." Quoted in

God. We all live *coram Deo*—before the *presence* of God. But there is a sense in which when we put ourselves before an icon, we put ourselves before the *face* of God. It is a means of putting ourselves before God and communing with him.

Icons don't only disclose. That is, they don't only tell us something. They also reveal. They show us something. They not only make known what is true about this world, for example, they tear down the veil of lies we tell ourselves about ourselves in this world (*re-* 'again' [as in a reversal] + *velum* 'veil'). In an idol one looks as one wants to look and at what one wants to look. But in an icon one is looked at—and possibly in a way that one doesn't want. We may treat it as the object of our observation, but in the end it observes us. We stand before the gaze of God. And this gaze does something to us. We feel the pull to see what it sees—what God sees. God does not see us the way we see ourselves. Icon viewing is the spiritual reversal of interpersonal perception. This is precisely why icon viewing is counter-formative.<sup>20</sup> Accustomed to present ourselves in a certain way and bring the right image before others, particularly on social media, the icon invites the exact opposite. Seen by the one who sees everything as it should be seen, we become aware of how we ought to see and present ourselves. His gaze strips us of our pretensions and feigned presentations. We become aligned with a vision of ourselves as bearers of his image, not our own. Indeed, as we gaze at these icons, we are reminded that we are image-bearing icons who should be pointing to the invisible God and should be looking at others like we are being looked at in this icon.

Icons instruct us in not only what to see but how to see and how to be seen. Meditation works in a similar fashion. The word "meditate" comes from the Greek word *medesthai*, meaning "to care for," and from the Latin word *meditari*, meaning to "consider," "think over," or

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Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 178.

20 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford University Press, 2004), 66–87.



“measure.” When we meditate, we give care to something. We take in its value and worth. We think over it and orient ourselves toward it. In the Christian tradition, we are invited to meditate on God’s Word, which includes a lengthy and detailed account of who we are as creatures and image bearers. We are consistently and frequently reminded that we are broken, disoriented, and even rebellious. And at the same time, we continually encounter God’s claim on us that we are his and that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). That we are his children. When we meditate, we consider these words of wisdom, these nuggets of truth—even if we don’t believe them. Most importantly, we practice them.<sup>21</sup> We continually tell ourselves the truth by meditating on these words and images. This work should lead us to be less interested and invested in presenting ourselves and proving our worth to others through our poses and postures.<sup>22</sup> We don’t have to present a certain image of ourselves. And we don’t have to long for it to impress anyone.

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21 As a practice, meditation is meant to transform living. Commenting on the view of ancient monks, Jean Leclercq, OSB, writes, “to meditate is to read a text and to learn it “by heart” in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one’s whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice.” Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961; 1974; 1982), 17. Cp. Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), 71–74.

22 Half of the battle is realizing that thoughts can be controlled (to some extent). Hear the plain but nonetheless wise words from “Abba Moses,” as recorded by John Cassian: “The mind cannot be free from agitating thoughts during the trials of the present life, since it is spinning around in the torrents of the trials that overwhelm it from all sides. But whether these will be either refused or admitted into itself will be the result of its own zeal and diligence. For if, as we have said, we constantly return to meditating on Holy Scripture and raise our awareness to the recollection of spiritual realities and to the desire for perfection and the hope of future blessedness, it is inevitable that the spiritual thoughts which have arisen from this will cause the mind to dwell on the things that we have been meditating on.” John Cassian, *The Conferences* (New York, N.Y./Mahwah, N.J.: Newman Press, 1997), 57.

We bear his image, and he does the impressing. Meditation reinforces what we hopefully already believe about ourselves but occasionally forget in the patterns and practices of social media.

Meditation also calls to mind our neighbor and her standing before God. We are reminded of how God sees her and how we ought to see her. Like us, she is broken, rebellious, disoriented. Like us, she too is a child of God. She bears his image. She is “fearfully and wonderfully made,” regardless of how she longs to present herself. Like us, she anxiously searches for the right filter and mulls extensively over the right caption. She, too, has the same misguided longings that lead her to pose fifteen times before she gets the right shot to post. She, too, can be enticed by narcissism, prompted to vanity, and inclined toward arrogance. We are all in the same boat. She is not something for us to compare ourselves to or compete against but someone to compliment us. Meditation brings to the fore important truths and realizations about us and our neighbor that ought to form and reform our anticipations and leanings as we interact with others on social media. Like icon viewing, meditation gets us “looking” to God’s intended and destined way for interacting with one another. How ought we to portray ourselves on social media? How are we supposed to treat our neighbor? How do we interact with her on these platforms? Which photos do we like? On what are we complimenting her? Are we reinforcing what this platform is inviting or are we reforming the very expectations it aims to fulfill?

What if young people were trained in the fundamentals of icon viewing? What if they were shown how to look at themselves and their world by learning from the one who rightly looks at them in icons? What if they were taught how to meditate and mull over the words of truth that seem to be easy to dismiss or manipulate for our own satisfaction? What if young people brought an awareness of their dignity and worth *in Christ* to everything they did—especially when posting pictures after the party? Let’s be clear, though. Icon viewing and meditation are not magical alternatives to looking at “selfies” and thinking about the right caption. Going through the motions of looking at a slab of wood or thinking about Galatians 3:26 will not inevitably make one allergic to

false gods. Idolaters are not fixer uppers; they have to be rebuilt from the ground up. Which is why icon viewing and meditation are *spiritual disciplines*, not mere replacement practices. They help us *unlearn* certain ways of seeing and thinking that disconnect us from truly inhabiting the kingdom of God here and now. They take the scales from our eyes, enabling us to see the idols we prostrate ourselves before and the idolatries that get their foot in the door. But they also *correct* our seeing and thinking by reforming and renewing our habits of perception, judgment, and memory.

## Conclusion

What would it look like to invite young people into alternative liturgies that might retrain their loves, hopes, wants? What if the path to joy was giving ourselves over to a God who gives himself for us? What if joy takes practice? Then it might be that inviting young people into the rhythms of grace will liberate them from the idols that have captured them.

Interestingly, this arc of redemption is hinted at on that same Arcade Fire album, *Everything Now*.<sup>23</sup> While it opens with the malaise and despair of “Creature Comfort,” on a later track, “Good God,” that despair is starting to be haunted by another possibility. While the first refrain sounds like cursing—good goddamn—by the end the narrator is wondering, “What if there’s a good God? *Damn*.” “Maybe there’s a good God, *damn*. If He made you.”

What if young people will find hope and rest and joy in being reminded that they are made, and that the one who loves them doesn’t require a performance?

What practices might foster this? Here are a few concrete practices for youth ministers to implement in worship and discipleship programs.

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23 Arcade Fire, *Everything Now*, Sonovox Records and Columbia Records, 2017.

- Teach a series on icon viewing. Introduce students to why Christians of the past used icons to inspire, edify, and educate novices and catechumens in the gospel story. Most importantly, talk to them about communing with God through icons. Accessible and helpful introductions to this practice.
- Practice icon viewing during your worship time. Have icons in your worship space. Allocate time during worship to view those icons. But also remind your students that the whole earth is an icon (“The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God” ~ John of Damascus, *Treatise; Seventh Century*)<sup>24</sup> that ought to be encountered and seen a certain way.
- Buy icons for young people in your congregation and give them as gifts for graduation or birthdays. Encourage them to place icons in most frequented rooms in the house (e.g., kitchen, bathroom, bedroom) or at school (e.g., inside locker, inside desk, on the back of his dorm door) and at eye level. Laminated icons could even be used as bookmarks.
- Teach a series on meditation. Begin by making students aware of their thoughts and even thoughtlessness. Have them read Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love*<sup>25</sup> to do so. Or selections of John Cassian’s *Institutes*.<sup>26</sup> Introduce how Christians of the past have practiced meditation in their daily routines.
- Practice meditation during youth group. Show them how to “do” it. One could tie this with *Lectio Divina*. Find a passage related to presentation and have them meditate on it several times. An accessible discussion of *Lectio Divina* can be found in Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices*.<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed

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24 St. John of Damascus, *Apologia of St John of Damascus Against Those who Decry Holy Images* (London: Thomas Baker, 1898).

25 Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), 59–76.

26 John Cassian, Boniface Ramsey, trans. *The Institutes of John Cassian* (New York: Newman press, 2000).

27 Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices* (Minnesota: Cistercian press, 1986), 1–19.

but accessible explanation, see Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*.<sup>28</sup>

- Via email, GroupMe, or social media, give young people weekly Scripture passages or devotional sayings to meditate on during the week. Send them as GIFs or memes. If you have an Instagram page, post these passages or sayings to your feed. Get creative with them (e.g., images from youth group but with these passages or sayings written on them or in the caption). Select passages that not only affirm their dignity and worth as persons but emphasize their life *in Christ*.

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28 Michael Cassey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph press, 1996).

