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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Stealing Sacraments: What Protestant Educators Can Learn from Other Religious Traditions

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Christian Thievery:
An Introduction to Stealing Religious Sacraments

> *"Educating people of faith did not in the past (and cannot today) take place only or even primarily in places recognizable as 'school'. Rather, this process takes place through and with practices — some of them deliberately and intentionally educational, but most pursuing other goods, such as communion with God or love of neighbor."*
> (Bass inVan Engen, 2004, v, emphasis mine).

Recent evangelical discussion of world religions has centered almost exclusively on the question of salvation and has reflected a three-prong typology of exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Perhaps you are suspicious—wary that in the name of post-modern toleration yet another author will try to advance arguments accommodating a mélange of world religions and their claims against the exclusive declarations of Christianity. No, this brief article is not a treatise on theological doctrine, but on *how adherents of various faith traditions practice their faith in ways from which Protestants should learn and in manners than can enhance their witness in the world.* [1]

[1] There are a number of writings, particularly as pluralism has found a strong foothold in the secularizing West, about the potential benefits of learning from other religions. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the preponderance of those urgings asks that Christians come to appreciate and understand how the doctrinal themes may have added meaning in the faith. See, for example, M. Harris and G. Moran (1998). Moran outlines his view of two distinct aims for the field of religious education, one that is internal to a religious group – to teach people to practice a religious way of life, and one that arises from comparing religious groups – to teach people to understand religion. He is disappointed that we as educators in religion know so little about Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Our minds may not allow us fully to grasp the possibility of no religion being able to think of its revealed truth as exclusive, says Moran, but plurality of religion simply illustrates the limitations of human beings and their languages. "It may be taught that the only way to be saved is by 'following Christ' or being a 'true Muslim'. The harsh language of the alternative (to be cast into everlasting hellfire) is directed at laggards within the religion, not at outsiders. Religions in the past had very little to say about people in other religions" (p. 38). Moran continues: "Somewhere in each religion is the admission that, because religion is only relative, God may have other ways of salvation that are not evident to us....no religion can proclaim itself as absolute...from a Christian perspective, the salvation of the Jew depends upon being a good Jew." Harris seems to agree: "We are at best *a* people of God and not in possession of the fullness of all truth" (p. 54, her emphasis).

Further, what may be learned from these practices can be incorporated into the teaching of Christianity in religion classes in both faith-based schools and public schools which have courses in Christianity. While some have charged that learning the Christianity in a formalized school classroom breeds largely a cerebral understanding of the faith, this article proposes countermeasures to this complaint and pursues means of both engaging more actively the life- and heart-aspects of our religion as well as more holistically understanding and integrating the principles for Christian living for our students.

These faith-building religious practices are here referred to as *sacraments*. It is proposed that Protestant school and church educators would be wise to kidnap the most effective means of nurturing faith in subscribers to other religious traditions and to incorporate them as a supplement to those practices most-commonly attempted in their educational ministries.

In the graduate-level course I teach called "The Educational Mission of the Church," I invite in articulate lay- and professional spokespersons from various faith traditions other than Protestant Christianity. The seminary students in the course and I listen to these religious educators reflect on how their brand of faith is inculcated, nurtured, and otherwise taught to their children, youth, and adults. Our panel is typically composed of four or five people, each one from a different faith tradition, such as Mormon, Jewish, Buddhist, Islam, Jehovah's Witness, and Christian Science.

Our inquires typically boil down to the following areas: we ask panelists to describe what drew them to embrace their faith; we ask them by what means they most effectively transmit their faith to their members; and we ask them to what extent the general nature of secularization and loss of religiosity in society impacts their faith.

Three main themes have emerged as I have listened to a few dozen respondents from other faith traditions share their practices of transmission[2]:

1. That people are more influential than doctrine drawing others to and sustaining faith.
2. That a faith community's and an individual's practice of some form of religious ritual(s) is important in nurturing faith.
3. That a deep commitment and radical discipline are expected of individuals and modeled by the faith community.

Finally, not only is it proposed that Protestant school and church educators should expand their rostrum of classroom educational practices, but also that *some of Protestant Christianity's currently employed educational perspectives and practices may even be frustrating the spiritual growth of our constituents*. In a provocative interview-based research study, Ruth Tucker (2002), former professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, deduces the three most common traits of a typical "walk away" from the Christian faith. [3] The profile of such a person is one who has been educated (or, perhaps more accurately stated *mis*educated or *non*-educated) and who fits the following descriptors:

1. Association with a fundamentalist or highly conservative religious background.
2. Inability to grapple with philosophical, theological, and/or scientific challenges to Scripture's reliability.
3. Painful life experiences of deep disappointment with God or God's people.

[2] I must confess: the insights of the panelists and the response of the students to the ideas of alternate faith education philosophy and strategy make this learning exercise one of my favorites of the semester. Then, as I read students' course evaluations, it appears to be one of their favorites too. Another comment may be noteworthy: the session is neither confrontational nor evangelistic, but centers on gaining our guests' perspective on the issues. We find that the representatives seem to enjoy the dialogue and they often gain a greater understanding of our Protestant educational enterprise as well.

[3] See also, Martin Marty's classic, *Varieties of Unbelief* (1964) for a more theoretical model of the topic.

Educating in faith in religious school classrooms and in churches is a perennial challenge, and the secularizing effects alluring postmodern men and women, boys and girls, away from absolute truth only compounds the difficulties. Although formulated half a century ago, James Smart's (1954) analysis of the rigor of educating in faith seems applicable today. He warned that the approach of educators such as ourselves suffers due to: one, the rigidity of tradition; two, the prevalence of moralism; three, the imbalance of the burden; four, the inadequacy of time; five, the subordination of priorities; six, the quality of programs; seven, the timidity of curriculum; eight, the fragmentation of revelation; and nine, the confusion of purpose.

The following table describes a trio of religious practices that may be productively borrowed from faiths other than Protestant Christianity.

Table 1. A Schemata of Three Alternate Faith Traditions and Relevant Educational Practices

Faith Tradition	Religious Practice	Potential Value Of Co-opted Practice	Recovered Practice From Christian History	Educational Learning Theory
Mormon	Missional Service	Increased action-oriented grasp of a too often verbally dominant faith	Pursuing dynamic, urgent, lay-oriented leadership, and faith-enhancive religious passion	Conceptual Disequilibrium
Judaism	Socializing Ritual	Renewed sense of located placement in grander metanarrative of the story of God	Ascribing human identity to the vibrancy of a value-forming community of faith	Experiential Ownership
Islam	Transforming Prayer	Reinvigorated valuation of symbolic prostration to shape interaction with God	Practicing a more tangible presence with an invisible yet time-and-space demanding God	Kinesthetic Symbolism

Based, then, on demonstrated effectiveness of the transmission of religious beliefs and values from other faith traditions, it is suggested that clever Protestant school and church educators might benefit from discovering, then co-opting for their own use, practices useful in expanding faith within their Christian education practices (see Table 1). Our religious education colleagues, if not compatriots, who are Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim, may have something to teach those

who, in line with Christian tradition, join in the quest to effectively educate Christians in faith for countercultural thinking, loving, and living. [4]

[4] I classify the main strands of Christianity into four groups: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox.

Learning from Other Faith Traditions:
Rebaptizing Sacramental Practices for Faith-Forming Protestant Christian Education

> *"Rarely, if ever, has American evangelicalism regarded non-Christian religion as something from which it can learn."*
> (McDermott, 2000, p. 10)
>
> *"Most learning is a matter not of seeing entirely new things but of seeing old things in a new way."*
> (McDermott, 2000, p. 14)

Christian dialogue with other faith traditions has always been a ticklish affair. Some, for instance, fear the act of dialogue may threaten to compromise the exclusive gospel message. [5] But, appropriate dialogue need not be threatening to the gospel nor compromising of the Christian mission. As Corduan (2002, p. 229) proposes: "By the grace of God, we have been entrusted with a true message of exclusive salvation in Christ. We add nothing to that message by refusing to talk to members of other religions or talking in triumphalist tones only…I dare say that we have a greater influence by listening to them and talking to them than by dismissing contact *a priori*." If this perhaps outlandish thought can be conceded, at least in theory, merit can be harvested from other religions.

The Brilliance of Mormon Religious Education: Pragmatizing Apologetics and Ownership

That Mormonism is growing around the world at phenomenal rates is not at question. [6]

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[5] Matthew 15:21-28 seems to imply Christians can learn from the faith of pagans. A number of fine books seek to address the nature and extent of legitimate Christian dialogue with other religions, including, K. Craig (1986), W. Corduan (1998), R. Losch (2001), G. McDermott (2000, Chapter 4, pp. 91-119), and S. Neill (1984).

[6] For a penetrating analysis of the mercurial ascendancy of the Mormons by one of the finest sociologists in our day, see R. Stark (2005). Stark claims that Mormonism has grown faster than any other new religion in American history. Between 1840 and 1980, it averaged a growth rate of 44 percent per decade; in the four decades 1940 through 1980, growth zoomed to an astonishing 53 percent. If it maintains a 30 percent growth rate, Mormons would exceed 60 million by the year 2080; if 50 percent, then 265 million by 2080. See also, a fine review of this book, G. McDermott (2006, January/February), p. 9.

And it is also evident that the Mormon religion is being absorbed and its tenets sustained by its members. Certainly, a number of factors can account for such remarkable fidelity, but one particular factor, as attested to by those who have experienced it, is also a significant educational and concretizing ingredient in the faith formation of Mormons. Following, then, is (1) an attempt to describe a laudable faith practice, (2) an endeavor to contrast this exemplary practice with a less-than-stellar approach, and (3) an explanation of how Protestants might adapt this practice in their schools and churches for effective use.

1. Describing an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. Evangelical Christian educational practice has something to learn from Mormon religious education. One of their most brilliant educational strategies is to enlist young men and young women, normally in their upper teens and twenties, to become "missionaries." Most Americans have encountered these evangelists on their doorsteps and, they have become a common phenomenon in modern society. What then is the brilliance of this form of education (see Table 2)? In the process of these young adults leaving home and displacement to geographical locations around the world, they are forced to become intimately conversant with the doctrine of their faith. As they encounter numerous skeptics in their door-to-door method, Mormon missionaries become adept at defending and owning their faith.

Experience in faith comes at a critical point in their lifecycle. At a time when many leave the church – young adulthood – Mormons intentionally engage their adherents in a faith-forming educational experience that cements their place in the Church. This form of hands-on educational activity increases an action-oriented grasp of a religious faith which can otherwise become a more stagnant verbally-dominant dogma.

2. Contrasting Faith Tradition Practices. Compare this Mormon missionary service approach with what Amish typically do with their youthful members. The Amish promote a period of experimentalism with life outside religion and their tightly knit community. This adolescent rite of passage is called "rumspringa" (pronounced ROOM-shpring-a).[7] Upon their sixteenth birthday, Amish youth, both male and female, are released from Amish restrictions and can explore secular life – the devil's playground – outside of the Amish community. The period may last from a few months to several years. By experiencing the outside world, they work temptations out of their systems and prepare themselves for making their most important life decision: to reject the secular world and be baptized into the Amish church. Their theory, though somewhat misguided and in contrast to the Mormon strategy of intentional integration, is, after a lifetime of only knowing one form of religious tradition, to release young people to search and experiment beyond the safety of their walls, in hopes that they will "come to their senses."[8] I suspect most know the result for those who do not subsequently "rechoose" the Amish church: they are shunned.[9]

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[7] For a somewhat insightful view into this custom of Amish right of passage, see the movie "Devil's Playground" (2002). In addition, recently a very short-lived, somewhat controversial television reality show aired highlighting the normally media-shy people called *Amish in the City*.

[8] A caption from the above film states: "About 90% of Amish youth rejoin the Amish church after rumspringa. This retention rate is the highest ever since the founding of the Amish church in 1693." Whether this is overly-optimistic propaganda or not is hard to detail given the cloistered nature of the Amish community. We acknowledge that various allegations are made and bizarre sects exist within the Mormon Church, see, for example, best-selling author Jon Krakauer's riveting book (2003).

[9] Shunning, as they describe it, is the community's last way of showing love. They think that deserters are breaking a promise made to the Amish Church. Other religious traditions around the world have a similar practice of shunning family members who leave the faith or commit some grave moral offense. The practice of shunning serves as a deterrent and helps to maintain conformity to tradition.

Table 2. The Potential Educational Value of One Aspect of Mormon Religious Education

Faith Tradition	Religious Practice	Potential Value Of Co-opted Practice	Recovered Practice From Christian History	Educational Learning Theory
Mormon	Missional Service	Increased action-oriented grasp of a too often verbally-dominant faith	Pursuing dynamic, urgent, lay-oriented leadership, and faith-enhancive religious passion	Conceptual Disequilibrium

3. Kidnapping an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. Do you think that those Mormon young adults know their faith at the end of their two-year mission? Do you think they have experienced a life-altering event that will likely ingrain their identities and future commitments in the Mormon Church? Do you think that they will be able to provide leadership and service to their families and local churches for the rest of their adult lives? The obvious answer to these rhetorical questions is a definitive "yes." Check this theory by talking to those who have experienced it. I have encountered some of these young adults after having returned from a term of mission service. They appear to be confident of their faith, and of themselves, and knowledgeable of their several sources of scripture.

Clever Protestant school and church educators need to conceive of and promote faith-forming efforts which promote such intentional and rigorous programs to get Christian adolescents and young adults into encountering unbelievers for real-world dialogue about the truth-claims of the Christian faith. In the process, these emerging believers will be grafted into the Christian faith through the proven benefit of *conceptual disequilibrium* – the intentional practice of challenging one's assumptions through doubt, reality-testing, and intense analysis of a particular system of beliefs. Yes, it certainly is an unusual and risky proposal to introduce to our churches and homes, and it has little precedent within Protestantism, but the results would yield nothing less than an ongoing feeder program for continuing this radical and somewhat extreme educational method.

Finally, then, it is proposed that to adapt this practice in our school and church educational efforts would advance the cause of dynamic, urgent, lay-oriented leadership, and faith-enhancive religious passion. We have something to learn from the Mormons and their style of religious education.

The Buoyancy of Jewish Religious Education: Ritualizing Action and Socialization

One of my favorite books is Chaim Potok's *Wanderings: A History of the Jews* – a well-woven story touching upon the historical markers and watershed events of the remarkable faith-journey of one of the most oppressed people-groups recorded.[10] The resiliency and uncanny survivalistic storyline of the Jews is unparalleled in religious history. Certainly, to grasp better how Jews have imagined educating their members in the faith would reap meaningful insights for the Christian effort.[11] For even "ethnic" Jews, those born of a Jewish heritage yet who may not hold to the Jewish religion, still seem to be extremely knowledgeable of their religious holidays, history, and rituals.[12]

1. Describing an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. Evangelical Christian school and church education practice has something to learn from Jewish religious education. Lauren Winner (2004, p. ix), a Jewish convert to Christianity, provides a unique perspective for those in her new religion:

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[10] It is brilliant, if somewhat fanciful, writing and reminds me of the Jewish roots of my Christian faith.

[11] Paradoxically, in spite of Judaism's ancient traditions of passing on faith and religious instruction, cultural relevance and postmodern concerns have been raised recently. In 2006 a two-day conference of Christians and Jews met to discuss worship. The Jewish leaders initiated the confab recognizing evangelicals are ten or so years ahead of them in more contemporary worship. Rabbi Dov Gartenberg of Congregation Beth Shalom, Simi Valley, California and fifteen other Jewish leaders met with evangelical Christians about new styles of worship, and it has been labeled "emergent Judaism" by some of its leaders. "We've got to learn from what our Christian colleagues are doing," said Shawn Landres, with Synagogue 3000, a progressive Jewish think-tank. Speakers at the conference said both faiths are struggling to stay relevant—particularly to young people—in a culture that is increasingly fast-paced and global, see G. Flaccus (21 January 2006, p. C8).

[12] I contrast "religious Jews," those who practice their faith, with "ethnic Jews," who seem not to, but nevertheless are versed in the history, culture, and practices of the ancestors' faith.

> …Christian practices…would be enriched, that is, they would be thicker and more vibrant, if we took a few lessons from Judaism…Jews do these things with more attention and wisdom not because they are more righteous nor because God likes them better, but rather because doing, because action, sits at the center of Judaism. *Practice is to Judaism what belief is to Christianity.* That is not to say that Judaism doesn't have dogma or doctrine. It is rather to say that for Jews, the essence of the thing is a doing, an action.

It would seem that it is just the opposite for much of American Christianity – a statement-of-faith-oriented, somewhat less action-oriented, creed.

This form of religious practice inculcates in its students a renewed sense of located placement in the grander metanarrative of the story of God by practicing the community's story in expressions of binding social ritual.

Table 3. The Potential Educational Value of One Aspect of Jewish Religious Education

Faith Tradition	Religious Practice	Potential Value Of Co-opted Practice	Recovered Practice From Christian History	Educational Learning Theory
Judaism	Socializing Ritual	Renewed sense of located placement in grander metanarrative of the story of God	Ascribing human identity to the vibrancy of a value-forming community of faith	Experiential Ownership

2. Contrasting Faith Tradition Practices. Contrast this, as previously hinted, with much of American Christianity and its gaping inconsistencies between those who claim Christianity yet whose lifestyle belies their stated belief. It is just this tendency – an oddball tenet of American faith that Christian belief need not find any expression in one's behavior – particularly visible amongst evangelicals – that needs this corrective stance from the Jewish religion.[13] William Hutchison (2003), American church historian at Harvard, says in many Western societies there is

[13] Data compiled on Canada and the U.S. shows that a Christian's lifestyle is not discernibly different from that of non-Christians. For a well-researched and all-too-compelling case, see R. Sider (2005).

a gap between profession of belief and committed Christian practice, but it is most striking in the United States. The pagan religions of the ancient world usually separated belief and conduct in a fashion unknown to first-century Christianity. The priests and priestesses of the ancient idols did not insist on a change of behavior. Rather, devotees of the pagan religions could live much as they pleased. They worshipped the deities in deference to public expectation, but in private, nothing changed (Watson, 1976). American Christians are much like these pagan religions in that their beliefs often are not manifest in their practices. Statements of faith seem suspect not because of their truth but because of those who subscribe to them yet behave in a manner incongruous with their stated beliefs.[14] This phenomenon of "undiscipled disciples" is the cause for a post-Christian nation where four of five adults believe they are Christian, according to a generation's worth of Gallup Polls.

3. Kidnapping an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. One of the first lessons anyone learns about effective educating in faith is the pivotal nature of socialization in shepherding people in the Christian way. Would-be mentors must be adept at entering the socio-psychological stories of people to guide them in Christ. Although the inspired truth of the gospel is persuasive, the beckoning love, unremitting concern, and personal involvement in the lives of people are also extremely forceful. Hear the poetic elocution in which Michael Warren (1990, p. 20) expresses this truth: "Faith can be elaborated, explained, and systematized in books, but it shouts, it dances, it lives and takes flesh in people." In this similar vein, Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (cited in Wilson 1989, p. 280) has keenly observed: "What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text-people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the students read; the text they will never forget." Learning faith is as much (or more)

[14] See a most fascinating essay, applying this principle to the prophet Jonah and his misadventures, A. Plantinga Pauw in C. Dykstra & D. Bass, Eds. (2002).

about engendering intimacy in human relationships nurtured by faith than articulated parsing or indoctrinating systems of belief. Ask honestly, for what do Protestant school and church educators wish more: Bible study groups or intentional Christian teachers and mentors?

Through worship and study, community governance and catechesis, spiritual direction and household prayer, Jews and Christians over time have been educated and formed within a web of practices transmitted and transformed by the communities that live them out in daily life. Engaging in such practices—whether highly ritualized or thoroughly quotianian—individuals and communities come to know themselves, others, and God in specific ways. In them, in multiple contexts of enculturation, resistance, and negotiation, orientations within the world are both expressed and absorbed (Bass in Van Engen, 2004).

Clever Protestant school and church educators need to conceive of and promote faith-forming efforts which promote socializing ritual which ascribes human identity to the vibrancy of a value-forming community of faith. In the process, these believers will be more handily grafted into the Christian faith through the proven benefit of *experiential ownership* – being assimilated into a value system that assigns significant human meaning through the intentional practice of communal rites and symbolic life-affirming commitment.

In a reactionary mode, for the most part to theologically distance itself from Roman Catholics and Jews, and because of ingrained suspicion of the value of ceremonial rite, Protestants have strip-mined most anything that smacks of ritual, with the exception of baptism and communion, out of its educational practices. And we have done so at our own peril, wasting a proven source of experiential ownership. Our Christian schools and churches have something to learn from the Jews and their style of religious education.[15]

[15] There is one more practice of Jewish religious education which I am tempted to endorse for Protestants, but for lack of space (and courage) I will not. It is this: American Jews pay for religious education in their synagogues.

The Obligation of Muslim Religious Education: Radicalizing Kinesthetic and Symbolic Commitment

Some political pundits project that the United States needs now to identify yet another international enemy on which to focus its rage now that the campaign in Iraq is winding down. More than a few think our next adversary may be the nationalistic religion of Islam. What comes to mind when the average person contemplates Islam? I suspect the first that comes is a mental image of their demonstrative practice of prone public prayer. Is this a translatable religious educational practice in our Christian schools and churches?

1. Describing an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. Evangelical Christian school and church education practice has something to learn from Muslim religious education. Lamin Sanneh grew up as the son of a Muslim tribal chief in Senegal, West Africa. He is now of course one of the brightest minds in Christian missiology and a professor at Yale Divinity School.[16] He attests to the powerful influence of prayer in the Islam religious faith practice. Muslims, individually or in a group, stop their occupations in order to offer prayer. Muslims, facing Mecca, pray five times a day – early morning, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. And a good Muslim washes forearms, feet, mouth, and nostrils three times, and recites a memorized prayer of faith, praise, and gratitude (Cahill, 1996). Two primary characteristics make Muslim prayer so powerful, Sanneh accentuates, first, due to the physicality involved, which requires conscious thought and both kinesthetic and symbolic action; and second, the radical, countercultural commitment

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Families are billed for tuition, a sizeable sum, for religious instruction. Now, based on the tested theory that one values what one pays for, it is worth some thought. When something, especially education, is free or cheap, it tends to be lightly regarded. When you think of Sunday school, for example, do you typically perceive it as high or low quality? Can you imagine the turmoil this radical notion would cause in a typical American church? I was first introduced to this theory of the increased sense of quality education, based on charging high tuition, by a remarkable former president of a liberal arts college at which I taught on the east coast, a college of highly-valued academics.

[16] See his publications, among others, 1989, 1993, 2003; and of relevance for this nuanced subsection "Muhammad's Significance for Christians: Biography, History, and Faith," in *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (1996).

involved in such flagrant and unabashed behavior. No matter where one is, the highly visible and ultimately submissive act of prostration is offered.

In the Christian faith, kneeling, standing, singing, praying, communion, baptism, all involve physical action that can be educational and formative. They are intended to communicate attitudes and make theological statements, but, it is suggested, are under-utilized and under-appreciated and lack the zealous, counter-cultural intentions of the corresponding Islam practice.[17]

2. Contrasting Faith Tradition Practices. Contrast this, once again, with another of the most prominent flaws of American Christianity, namely, that historians have commented on the shallowness of personal commitment that accompanies much of the post-World War II religious resurgence. Church membership could mean little more than respectability and belief in the American way of life.

The middle-class subculture has existed in such a close relationship with Christianity it sometimes is difficult to distinguish what is American from what is Christian. And the newly modernized self-styled Messiah is crowned prince of a new religion – civil religion, environmental faith, cultural Christianity. The result? Sociologist Peter Berger (1964, p. 119) speaks what church-people know is true but afraid to admit: "The spirit has gone out of American religious institutions to reshape and rather have been shaped by society's agenda."

Friedrich Nietzsche (cited in Oaklander 1996, p. 432) lambastes those who re-label the divine in comfortable button-down, middle-class tones: “You have caged Jesus, tamed him, domesticated him…The roaring bull has become a listless ox. You have gelded God!” God is

[17] It is ironic that Muslims are often criticized for their radical faith commitment by Christians, who want to sustain a flaccid level of commitment in their faith – not too blatant so as not to appear fanatical – directed by a Lord who demands “all or nothing” in regards to Him.

then no longer the universal monarch who inspires confidence and awe, but a weak mascot who goes along with the crowd.

The gospel, as represented in the teachings of Jesus, is characterized in the New Testament as an "offense," but some of today's abridged versions seem anything but offensive. The cross is generally adopted as a popular symbol, a fashion statement. Theologian Carl Henry (1988, p. 17) warns: "American evangelicalism is being spiritually thwarted by its affluence. No group of Christians has…more to learn about sacrifice. Our lifestyles are clearly non-Christian…marked by greed, extravagance, self-gratification, and lack of compassion for the needy." The striking words of Jesus are blunted.

It is no wonder that we find knowing him, following him, and becoming like him less appealing than learning a new technique. After a century of depersonalized modernity inside and outside the Church, can we, should we propose a new version of Christianity? We must: one of radical commitment, countercultural values, and seemingly foolish sacrifice, or in other words, an affront to prevailing sensibilities.

Permit, if you will, a moment of personal indulgence. When I was ten, I reasoned that if I could become an archeologist and finally locate Noah's missing ark, then, as a result – certainly and universally – our skeptical world would have no choice but to believe. I was young and naïve. Perhaps I feel the same again. Because of the misconstrued notions that much of our world has about the real Jesus, older but maybe still naïve, I wonder: if only the Church could stand up and lucidly re-announce the genuine Jesus, would belief then come in droves?

But alas, things are not that simple with arks or cultural religions or Jesuses.

Table 4. The Potential Educational Value of One Aspect of Muslim Religious Education

Faith Tradition	Religious Practice	Potential Value Of Co-opted Practice	Recovered Practice From Christian History	Educational Learning Theory
Islam	Transforming	Reinvigorated valuation of symbolic	Practicing a more tangible presence with an	Kinesthetic

	Prayer	prostration to shape interaction with God	invisible yet time-and-space demanding God	Symbolism

3. Kidnapping an Alien Faith-Forming Practice. In *American Religion* literary critic Harold Bloom (1992, p. 196) identifies quintessential American religion as that devoted to self-affirmation and human freedom and asserts that evangelical Christianity is the most representative example of this religion. He avers: "This is faith more in self than Christ, concerned more with individual expression than care for community and seeking more freedom *for* the self than freedom *from* sin." What Protestant educators should perceive, then, is that otherworldly nature of their faith and uncompromising commitment to faith.[18]

Murphy (2004, p. 185) explains how formative even the *actions* of worship (specifically prayer) can be:

> Even our bodies are implicated in the formation and transformation that prayer effects. Kneeling in worship is an act of the production of Christian bodies. Kneeling, bowing, genuflecting, closing the eyes, and clasping the hands do not so much express or communicate certain subjective inner states as much as they produce particular kinds of people. Kneeling and other liturgical bodily postures are not mere *displays* of ritualized behavior. Rather, the act of kneeling itself 'generates a body identified with subordination.' This is not the subordination of forced enslavement or quiescent obedience—despite the lamentable abuses and misunderstandings in the church's past—but is the willing surrender, inscribed on one's very body, to the will of God.

[18] Some Christians might object and counter that many wear a symbol of the cross around their neck or tattooed on their body. But, unfortunately, the trend of cross-wearing has devolved for many into little more than a style displayed by Christians and non-Christians alike.

Clever Protestant school and church educators need to conceive of and promote faith-forming efforts which promote a reinvigorated valuation of symbolic prostration to shape interaction with God. In the process, these believers will be more handily absorbed into a Christian faith through the practice of *kinesthetic symbolism* – a literal, physical action meant to convey a religiously symbolic gesture of submission and commitment and other-worldly devotion. It is submitted that through this practice, a more tangible presence with an invisible yet time-and-space demanding God is more easily envisaged. We have something to learn from the Muslims and their style of religious education.

A Disquieting Conclusion:
The Chronic Paucity of Critical Engagement in Christian Educational Practice

> *"Engagement is the experience we are having or ought to be having as Christians, namely, our encounters with God, our responses to this action, God's confrontations with us. The opposite word is detachment — connoting separation from any conscious sense of confronting the living God and dealing with his action in the world."*
> (Hunter 1963, p. 7)

In a contested account, Austin Miles weaves a story of his troubled religious experience—moving from show business to ordination and traveling speaker in the Pentecostal tradition and Assembly of God denomination, with regular appearances and close friendships with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, to his loss of credentials, and faith.[19] He came from unbelief and was groomed-mentored-discipled-educated to be a superstar in this wing of the Christian world. Observe in the following quote the incommodious form his religious regimen took. (It is unsettling, to say the least.)

As Miles (1989, p. 113) began to be socialized into the Pentecostal tradition, he later reflects, and laments, and accuses:

> Gradually, I stopped reasoning things out and stopped looking beneath the surface of events. Passively, I let my thoughts be programmed into that unquestioning, blind faith that the pastors carefully instill in the faithful as the only way to know God. That narrowing of my view, that closing of my mind, had become a vise that choked off free will and intelligent action. Instead, I let them fill my mind with stereotyped thoughts and

[19] This biographical and all-too-graphic account of Austin Miles (1989) has the *de rigueur* elements that make for a salacious soap opera, but sadly, it is one of the creepiest accounts of religious manipulation and perverted control I have read in recent memory.

> falsified feelings. The displacement of my true thoughts and feelings produced a euphoric state and a sense of release from the evils, cares, and responsibilities of this world. It was like sweeping those things under the rug. There was no room to question or challenge: such thoughts were simply enemies of faith. The pastor to whom one would submit would always be there to assist, to guide, and to have the last word.

These are tortured words. (Reread them.) Although they are melodramatic and make my point in fulsome exaggeration, my concern for nurturing faith in Christians is that a culture of learning emerge which emphasizes freedom for active, engaging, critical thought rather than passive acquiescence and mere acceptance.

Unfortunately another *sacrament* prominent in some quarters of Christian school and church educational practice is a pronounced lack of critical engagement, reflective thought, or, as Groome (1980, p. 37) coins it, "shared praxis" – *a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian story and its vision toward the end of lived Christian faith.*

While we happily concede that much good is occurring in Protestant religious education, we contend that outside our faith tradition lie other exemplary educational practices worth adapting to our urgent enterprise. Such examination will require critical reflection and creative acclimatization. In this brief proposal, we suggest that the implementation of three strategies from other-than-Protestant faith traditions are worth innovative implementation in our Christian schools and churches – an extended apprenticeship in apologetics and testimony, an intentional activation of ritualized community experience that practices and dramatizes the faith-story, and intentionally-kinesthetic and symbolic prayer behavior that enhances submission and perspective regarding our position in the presence of God.

Clever Protestant school and church educators should blatantly steal sacraments from other faiths, with no remorse.

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