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Pastor as Poet of the Soul

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Pastor as Poet of the Soul

Zachary J. Luben

Abstract: *The church finds itself in a culture that challenges the idea of divine action in the world—one of the results of living in a secular age. We are more likely to talk about “good luck” or “coincidence” than we are about God acting in history. Charles Taylor calls this the immanent frame—that we have constructed a social view that frames our lives without the supernatural. In addition, Hartmut Rosa describes modernity as social acceleration, which puts us out-of-sync in our relationships to others and the world. For the pastor, these cultural and social forces at work often lead to malaise and alienation, which are also widespread in the church. But the pastor is uniquely called to name God’s action and invite the church to recognize it in their everyday lives. This paper proposes that understanding the role of the pastor as poet is a proactive and creative response to these secular developments.*

Introduction

Toward the end of 2021, Barna Research surveyed ministers and found that thirty-eight percent of pastors had considered quitting full-time ministry that year.¹ This was an increase of nine full points since Barna asked the same question at the beginning of the year. It might be tempting to simply attribute this increase to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but according to David Kinnaman, “We started seeing early signs of burnout amongst pastors before COVID.”² The pandemic may have exasperated the issue, but it alone cannot account for the burnout many pastors feel.

In 1989, Henri Nouwen wrote, “The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice, ‘We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the church, or a priest. We are in control. And if we are not, then we have

¹ Barna Research, “Pastors Well Being.” <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/>

² Barna Research, “Pastors Well Being.”

to work harder to get in control.”³ Nouwen recognized, even back then, that the pastor faces a culture that thinks God and the pastor are no longer necessary. This reality led to low self-esteem and burnout.⁴ These social forces were certainly heightened by the pandemic and our attempts to mitigate it, but they predate COVID-19. Also, it is not only the church that questions the need for God, but many pastors (also) question the necessity of God, or doubt the reality of divine action in the world.

To better understand the cultural location in which pastors find themselves we can look at the work of philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Taylor’s work, *A Secular Age*, gives further insight into the secular world that Nouwen named back in 1989. Often when we hear the word secular, we think of the polarity of opposition between sacred and secular, but Taylor argues that no such binary exists in the twenty-first century. Every individual in the west, whether religious or not, lives in a secular context—what he calls *Secularity 3*.⁵ One of the primary characteristics of *Secularity 3* is what Taylor calls the *immanent frame*. A key characteristic of the *immanent frame* is that it frames life in the natural and precludes transcendence.⁶

To this, we can add Rosa’s view that a society is modern “if its mode of stabilisation is dynamic, that is, if it needs progressive growth, acceleration, and innovation just to reproduce its social structure and to maintain its status quo.”⁷ Rosa names this *social acceleration* and suggests that the burnout we experience as a culture is that the pace of life and our constant need for more puts us out-of-sync in our relationships, leading to alienation, “a specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and

³ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 32.

⁴ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*. Nouwen suggests that the pastor/minister’s response is to lean into “irrelevance” and rediscover the mystics through disciplines such as contemplative prayer and solitude. Nouwen’s suggestions are productive ones, but they seem to miss that many pastors, themselves, doubt the necessity of God or the need for his divine action in the world.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 20-21.

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *How (NOT) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 141.

⁷ Hartmut Rosa, “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa,” downloaded at https://journals.sagepub.com/pbassets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration_and_Resonance.pdf, 2-3.

thus without any other inner connection.”⁸ The solution to this form of relationship is not, as we might expect, to slow things down. Even if this were possible, it would not resolve the problem. Instead, Rosa suggests that *resonance* is the way forward, by which he means finding/making connections in our relationships that are “alive.”⁹

Both Rosa’s and Taylor’s work have been applied specifically to the congregation and the role of the pastor by Andrew Root in his “Ministry in a Secular Age” book series. Root’s work is of particular interest when considering the pastor as poet. While Root does not specifically name the pastor as poet in his writings, his work can provide the foundation for pastors to view themselves as poets. To be clear, understanding the pastor as a poet does not mean that one needs to write poetry. Rather, the poet is one who sees the world as alive and full of potential for *resonance*. As such, the pastor as poet views the lives of those they are serving not through the lens of the *immanent frame* but as open to God’s action and seeks to invite the community of believers to name and meet God.

This paper will first look briefly at Taylor’s and Rosa’s respective works as a way to help explain the environment that contributes to the crisis pastors are currently experiencing. Then it will then look at the work of Andrew Root and the ways he has applied Taylor’s and Rosa’s thinking to the role of the pastor. Finally, I will argue that understanding the pastor as poet is a rich and textured way to understand the task of ministry when considering how to best serve the church community in the daily routines of life.

Taylor – *Secularity 3, The Immanent Frame, and the Pastoral Malaise*

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tells the story of how we arrived at *Secularity 3*, which is a shift in our understanding of the secular world. In *Secularity 1*, there were recognized secularized public spaces as distinct from the dominance of religious space and time. In *Secularity 2*, there was a marked decline in religious belief and practice. Now, *Secularity 3* takes us further into secularism, which consists of, among other things, “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹⁰ Taylor wants to better

⁸ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (trans. James C. Wagner, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 184.

⁹ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance*, 174.

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

understand why it is that believing in God is so difficult in the Western modern world. He argues that *Secularity 3* is the result of new inventions.¹¹ James K.A. Smith puts it this way, “The emergence of the secular is bound up with the production of a new option—the possibility of exclusive humanism as a viable social imaginary—a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence.”¹² Thus, *Secularity 3* is not only a loss or reduction of belief or sacred space but rather the result of our culture claiming that belief in God is optional—only one of many other viable options. According to Taylor, the presence of other viable options is not because sacred space has been lost or eliminated. Rather he argues it is through addition that new options previously unavailable became possible, “I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings, and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.”¹³

To better understand how we arrived at *Secularity 3*, Taylor argues that we shifted from being “porous people” to “buffered selves.” In the ancient and medieval social imaginary, the individual self was open and vulnerable to the enchanted outside world—susceptible to grace and things like demon possession. This is the “porous self.” In the modern, secular social imaginary, the self is insulated in an interior mind, no longer vulnerable to the transcendent or the demonic. This is the “buffered self.”¹⁴ On the positive side, this shift toward the insulated, interior, buffered self means that we are no longer filled with anxiety that “the spirits are angry” when, for example, the weather abruptly changes. We have science to help us understand these natural processes. On the negative side of this shift, our ability to imagine God acting in the world is severely hindered.

As buffered selves, we live in a context where people no longer need to look outward for purpose and meaning. Rather, the interior and the material have become the focus, the *immanent frame*.¹⁵ It is a lens that views

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

¹² Smith, *How (NOT) to be Secular*, 26.

¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

¹⁴ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 140-142. Smith summarizes Taylor’s thinking and offers the above helpful definitions.

¹⁵ Taylor argues “The rise of the buffered identity has been accompanied by an interiorization; that is, not only Inner/Outer distinction, that between the Mind and World as separate loci, which is central to the buffer itself; and not only the development of this Inner/Outer distinction in a whole range of epistemological theories of a mediational type from Descartes to Rorty; but also the growth of a rich vocabulary of interiority, an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored.” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.

the self as the highest entity and bases values on what is most immediately accessible—our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. What is exceedingly “immanent” to us is *us*. When you frame the world in this way, there is little room for the transcendent or the divine, which is one of the key components of the *immanent frame*. Smith’s summary of Taylor defines the *immanent frame* as “A constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.”¹⁶ Recognizing the *immanent frame* helps us understand the consumerism and materialism of twenty-first-century America. The accumulation of resources has become a valid and acceptable option around which people can construct their lives to create meaning. The shift to the buffered interior emphasizes the need for therapists and psychiatrists to address mental illness, trauma, and lack of purpose. This helps us understand why the pastor can feel unsure about their role in the lives of those they are serving. What role, if any, does God have in addressing the well-being of the individual? At best, in the *immanent frame*, God is optional to human flourishing. And, for many, God is either unnecessary or unrealistic.

In light of this, Andrew Root observes an intense *pastoral malaise* at work. In his book, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, Root shares about a meeting with a pastor who expresses doubt about his role. Key to this pastor’s doubt is the idea that we now live in a world “where it is quite easy to forget, deny, or simply not care that there is a transcendent dimension to reality.”¹⁷ In the past, both pastors and people assumed that the world was full of mystery and were open to the supernatural. In that world, the pastor understood their role. Root notes, “It was the pastor’s job to stand on the boundary of these times, helping people make sense of the flood of meaning as the pastor moved people back and forth between ordinary and sacred time.”¹⁸ Root argues that the pastor is no longer needed to fill this role because God has become unnecessary.¹⁹ This reality has led to an identity crisis for the pastor.²⁰ What is the role of the pastor if God is not necessary, if there is no mystery to embrace if there is no transcendence to explain?

¹⁶ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 141.

¹⁷ Andrew Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 5.

¹⁸ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 7.

¹⁹ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 6.

²⁰ Root uses Taylor’s definition of malaise: “(1) the sense of fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize

The secular shift toward the buffered interior has many pastors considering becoming therapists and wondering what systematic theology has to offer the people they serve. If God is optional, then the traditional role of the pastor is thrown into doubt as well.²¹ Remember, pastors also live within the *immanent frame*. Part of the malaise pastors experience is because they also doubt divine action in the world.

According to Taylor, we all live in the *immanent frame*, even if we believe in transcendence. Smith agrees, “The question isn’t whether we inhabit the immanent frame, but how. Some inhabit it as a closed frame with a brass ceiling; others inhabit it as an open frame with skylights open to transcendence.”²² Both perspectives are possible in the *immanent frame*, though some suggest that the former is the most rational.²³ Both, if communicated well, are “takes,” perspectives on life that are open to appreciating other perspectives.²⁴ When those “takes ” on life shift from being open to closed, they become “spins.”²⁵ Taylor’s point is that in the *immanent frame*, most of us have “takes” on the world, and thus our beliefs are haunted by doubt.²⁶ Pastors are likely haunted by their own doubt as they serve a community that also doubts God’s action in the world. This haunting adds to pastoral malaise and the pastors’ questioning of their purpose.

the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.” Root, *The Pastor in A Secular Age*, 5.

²¹ Taylor does not actually think that meaning and purpose can be found in the immanent frame, and suggests that many of us experience cross pressures: “The whole culture experiences cross pressures between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent.” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

²² Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 93

²³ Taylor notes that the immanent frame itself does not suggest which “take” is preferred: “By contrast, my understanding of the immanent frame is that, properly understood, it allows of both readings, without compelling us to either.” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550.

²⁴ Smith defines “take” this way: “A construal of life within the immanent frame that is open to appreciating the viability of other takes.” Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 143

²⁵ “A construal of life within the immanent frame that does not recognize itself as a construal and thus has no room to grant the plausibility to the alternative.” Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 143

²⁶ Taylor suggests, “The second version is what those experience whose strongest leanings move them towards at least some search for spiritual meaning, and often towards God. These are haunted by a sense that the universe might after all be meaningless as most reductive materialism describes.” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 593.

Secularity 3 and the *immanent frame* give us insight into the burnout pastors feel as they serve the church by emphasizing the loss of relevance pastors experience in their current context. This insight can help us discover new ways of being pastors to those we serve. Once we recognize what it means to live and pastor in a secular age, we will be better prepared to serve from an “open take.” We will be better prepared to help people name and speak of God as they develop their own “open takes.” Similar insight can be gained by looking at the work of Hartmut Rosa and his definition of modernity, *social acceleration*, and his constructive work on *resonance*. To this, we now turn our attention.

Rosa - Social Acceleration & Resonance

Rosa, in *Social Acceleration*, argues that “the experience of modernization is an experience of acceleration.”²⁷ In our globalized world, it is easy to feel that things are moving too quickly and we never have enough time. The experience of trying to get a church community to commit to a new program or initiative only to be told, “we don’t have the time,” is a common one for pastors. However, as Rosa shows in his ambitious work, the experience of time in modernity is much more complicated than feeling rushed or lacking enough time.

Rosa identifies three dimensions of Social Acceleration: 1.) Technical Acceleration, 2.) The Acceleration of Social Change, 3.) The Acceleration of the Pace of Life.²⁸ He notes that these three dimensions are “analytically distinct but interconnected, logically irreducible to each other, and empirically related in complex and partly paradoxical ways.”²⁹ In summary of Rosa’s thinking, it is most important to recognize that *social acceleration* is multifaceted. It is “a growth in quantity per unit of time” or “comprehensive processes of increase.”³⁰ The result of this acceleration is:

This means that modern capitalist society, in order to culturally and structurally reproduce itself, to maintain its formative status quo, must be forever expanding, growing and innovating, increasing production and consumption as

²⁷ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, (trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New York: Colombia University Press, 2015), 21.

²⁸ Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 80.

²⁹ Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 71.

³⁰ Rosa, *Resonance*, 1.

well as options and opportunities for connection –in short: it must always be dynamically accelerating.³¹

So, we find ourselves working harder and faster to remain exactly where we are.³² According to Rosa, acceleration is rooted in an implicit belief that the good life “consists in making more of the world available, attainable, and accessible.”³³ Unfortunately, this *social acceleration* has the opposite effect—instead of making the world more available, we are actually destroying it.

This depressing thought is not the worst part of the *social acceleration*. Rosa suggests that, “An aimless, endless compulsion toward escalation ultimately leads to problematic; even dysfunctional or pathological, relationships to the world on part of both subjects and society as a whole.”³⁴ The process of acceleration transforms our relationships with time, space, other people, our environment, and even to ourselves.³⁵ This transformation of relationships can lead ultimately to alienation. Rosa defines alienation as “a mode of relating to the world in which the subject encounters the subjective, objective, and/or social world as either indifferent or repulsive.”³⁶ That is, alienation means experiencing oneself and the world as dead. Alienation is the result when we become out-of-sync in our relationships. For Rosa, the good life is defined not by making the world more available, attainable, and accessible but through quality of relationships with the world and society.³⁷

One might think that if the problem of alienation comes with speeding up things, then the answer will be to slow down, but Rosa does not think that this is right. First, Rosa notes that not everything is being sped up. There are “speed limits” to certain relationships in the world. For example, the workings of the earth and biological processes cannot be indefinitely accelerated.³⁸ Second, deceleration, in itself, does not make our deadness to the world cease or help us feel alive again. This is because slowing things down for a period of time is usually done with the idea that it will lead us to better production later. Deceleration cannot lead us to the

³¹ Rosa, *Resonance*, 1.

³² Rosa, *Resonance*, 415.

³³ Hartmut Rosa, “Acceleration and Resonance,” 3

³⁴ Rosa, *Resonance*, 2.

³⁵ Rosa, *Resonance*, 1.

³⁶ Rosa, *Resonance*, 178.

³⁷ Rosa, *Resonance*, 5.

³⁸ For an in-depth assessment of “speed limits,” see Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 80-93.

good life because it does not automatically make us sensitive to what matters most.

For Rosa, *resonance* is ultimately the answer to the problems *social acceleration* brings to the secular culture. *Resonance* is, “a kind of relationship to the world, formed through affect and emotion, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which the subject and world are mutually affected.”³⁹ It describes a quality of relationship that honors the other person as having their own voice and being open enough to allow ourselves to be affected or reached by them. The answer to alienation is not slowing down but rather seeking resonant relationships. We might call this the practice of mutual edification, or being open to letting others into the interior of our lives.

Rosa offers three kinds of relationships that can become resonant, or what he calls “axes of resonance.” First is the horizontal axis, which refers to the connections one has with other people in the mode of love and friendship. Second is the diagonal or material axis that connects us with material things. Third is the vertical axis which gives us a sense of how we are connected to the ultimate reality as a whole.⁴⁰ For our present conversation, the vertical axis is the most generative and useful for the pastor.

Rosa is a sociologist and is not interested in arguing for any particular religion or theological claim. However, he is interested in establishing that the appeal of religion is the idea that God is foundational to the notion of a responsive world.⁴¹ He writes, “Religion is then a promise that the world or universe or God still speaks (or sings) to us even when we are incapable of hearing it, when all our axes of resonance have fallen mute.”⁴² We might add to this that religion promises God still speaks in the *immanent frame*. That is, God speaks even when no one is listening. For Christians the vertical axis claims that God is personal and becomes one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, and this God is still involved in the world.

Understanding *social acceleration* gives us a fuller picture of the challenges that pastors face as they seek to fulfill their calling. The idea of *resonance* offers an alternative way of being in the world that shifts one’s focus from the accumulation of resources to seeking a quality of relationship, both to our world and to others. Andrew Root has taken the

³⁹ Rosa, *Resonance*, 174.

⁴⁰ Rosa, “Acceleration and Resonance,” 4.

⁴¹ Rosa, *Resonance*, 258.

⁴² Rosa, *Resonance*, 265.

ideas of Taylor and Rosa and specifically applied them to the pastor and the congregation. His thinking is helpful in showing how the pastor might better navigate our secular culture, and I will argue next that it provides the groundwork for understanding the pastor as poet of the soul.

Root - Immanent Frame

As mentioned above, living in the *immanent frame* creates the conditions for pastors to experience malaise. Pastors live in a world where they wonder what, if any, role they have in the lives they serve. Root recounts a conversation he had with his wife, Kara, who is a Lutheran pastor. She explained that so many pastors feel buried under institutional demands that they rarely had time or energy for ministry. Pastors “live with a sneaking suspicion that all they’re good for is managing religious stuff that no one really values.”⁴³ Both the pastor and the congregation live in a world that questions divine action, and there is no way to escape it. What does this mean then for the role of the pastor?

Root argues, “A pastor reminds her people to await the coming of God, to prepare them in the waiting for the possibility of God’s arriving.”⁴⁴ Key to understanding Root’s argument is his concept of God as an arriving God. He writes, “To say God is uniquely the arriving God—a living God who makes himself known as an event in history—is to claim that God’s being is in God’s becoming.”⁴⁵ Admittedly this is a complicated idea, and so Root tries to offer some clarity, “To say it like this is simply to claim that the only way for us to know God (and therefore experience God’s being) is to encounter God’s historical arrival.”⁴⁶ In the secular *immanent frame*, the idea of God acting in history is contested. This reality makes Root’s vision for the pastor one that is difficult to practice. Yet, Root argues the way forward for pastors is by returning our attention to the God who arrives in history and that by helping our churches wait for God’s action, we will escape the malaise of the *immanent frame*. Pastors need to remind the church that the transcendent God has become immediate in Jesus, God is still working in the world, and Jesus Christ will come again.

To see one of the primary roles of the pastor as waiting and expecting God to act likely feels odd because it challenges what many pastors feel pressured to do in a culture that focuses on resources and doing things

⁴³ Andrew Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), xix.

⁴⁴ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 185.

⁴⁵ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 184.

⁴⁶ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 184.

bigger and better. Many pastors view church success through the lens of resources: “Do we have enough money? If only I had volunteers like the church down the street, then I could really do something.” And church members think in similar terms. (e.g.: “If only our church were bigger or had more programs for my kids”) We live so unreflectively in the *immanent frame* we often fail to recognize the ways it defines how we conceive of divine action, as if God needed our activity or our resources in order to act in the world!

The way forward, then, is not through more activity but through prayer. Prayer is an “open take” on the world. Root writes, “To say that the pastor is one who prays and teaches others to pray is to say that the pastor leads her people into addressing and being addressed by a speaking God, sharing in the person of Jesus, who prays for the world and teaches his disciples to do the same through the Spirit (Luke 11:1-13).”⁴⁷ Note that Root emphasizes that prayer is not a one-way communication. Prayer is also being addressed by a speaking God, and to pray for others. To understand prayer this way is to recognize its relational quality both to God and to others. Prayer is one of the ways the vertical axis of resonance can be experienced. This insight keeps us from turning prayer into a wish list born out of immanence.⁴⁸ Prayer is never just about me or my wants and needs.

Root - Social Acceleration and Resonance

Social Acceleration creates a time-famine for church.⁴⁹ Even when a pastor has resources like a large budget, they will find that their congregation still lacks the most important resource--time. Root comments, “At its core the congregation isn’t short on membership or relevance; it’s short on time.”⁵⁰ One of the products of this time-famine is that we begin to think of life in terms of the future. Because of the sped-up pace of life, we always project the good life as a future reality, so we need to spend our time

⁴⁷ Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 274.

⁴⁸ Root notes the various ways prayer has been misunderstood and misused: “From the Prayer of Jabez to the prosperity gospel, prayer has been wrongly seen as a way to continue to focus on the immanent acts of counting dollars, possessions, and followers while insuring yourself against bad luck. This is not really prayer, but wishful thinking cased in religious language.” Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 277.

⁴⁹ Modernity has provided us with technological advances that should save us time, however the opposite is true: “Rosa shows that the more we become fertile in technological gadgets and identity options, the more we find ourselves in a time-drought, or what he calls a ‘time-famine.’” Andrew Root, *Congregation in A Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 153-154.

⁵⁰ Root, *Congregation in A Secular Age*, 156.

in the present gathering resources.⁵¹ For the pastor and the church, the focus becomes the chasing of resources to reach some imagined future good. In the speed of our lives and the focus on resources, our openness to God becomes closed as we view the future in material terms. Church becomes a place where morals and a good work ethic are taught in hope of securing a future defined by resources. In this way, the church community becomes so future-focused that it fails to consider that the teachings of Jesus and divine action have anything to do with the present moment. God is relegated to a never-attainable future. Thus, the church becomes a place not where we are open to the action of God in the world but a source of further alienation.

Root follows Rosa and argues that *resonance* is the way to overcome alienation. The issue, though, for pastors and churches is that *resonance* is not guaranteed. Root writes, "But resonance is uncontrollable, making it much different from the innovations of dynamic stabilization. Resonance is elusive because it's a true encounter with otherness."⁵² Root further develops his thinking in his book *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, where he argues that the pastor helps the church wait for God, "The congregation needs, and the church is called, to wait as the very way of bringing its action and strong evaluations together."⁵³ Root invites us to consider that one of the primary roles the pastor is called to perform is to attest to the dialectical and paradoxical nature of faith, "the confession that life is found in death, grace in judgement, community in confession, justification in sinners, and that being lost is the only way to be found."⁵⁴ Without the dialectic, Christianity becomes just another way for people to accrue resources and God is understood as a tool for material gain. With the dialectic, the pastor and church shift their focus from doing and having to waiting and being, trusting that it is through these that they will meet God and discover joy.

This brief interweaving of Taylor, Rosa, and Root does not do justice to the fullness of their work, but their insights do offer value to the pastor. This lays a foundation to better understand the pastor as a poet of the soul. Pastors are uniquely positioned through their pastoral work in the church to help parishioners recognize and experience God's action in the world. This is poetic work.

⁵¹ Root, *Congregation in A Secular Age*, 157-158.

⁵² Root, *Congregation in A Secular Age*, 211.

⁵³ Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 180.

⁵⁴ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 213.

Pastor as Poet of the Soul

The church needs poets—poets in our pulpits and poets who come alongside us in life, inviting us to imagine there is more to this world than it offers. M. Craig Barnes, in his book, *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, writes, “A good poet is hard to find, and nothing is more tragic than wasting one in a busy office.”⁵⁵ By this, we do not mean that our churches need pastors who recite poems in the pulpit or compose rhyming verse during pastoral crises. Rather, we need pastors who resist the deadening and flattening of the world that the *immanent frame* offers. Pastors need to develop “open takes,” or openness to God and the world like a poet does, in order to speak to our souls.⁵⁶

The “Open Take” (Openness) of the Poet

The temptation of the *immanent frame* for pastors is to seek mastery of the mystery, the removal of ambiguity. Willie James Jennings, in *After Whiteness*, writes, “I had learned to love an intellectual form that performed white masculinist self-sufficiency, a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one’s self second, and if possible, of one’s world.”⁵⁷ Jennings is critiquing the university setting and its pursuit of mastery, which keeps people from recognizing the fragments of their lives.⁵⁸ For Jennings it is the fragment work that leads to “communion, the working and weaving together of fragments in the forming of life together.”⁵⁹ While not all pastors are trained in seminary, the influence of the university in the life of the pastor is hard to deny. Therefore, Jennings’ critique of mastery in the university is applicable to the pastor. Mastery of the mystery is an attempt to formulize God in order to explain God. Pastors who view their roles this way are ill-prepared to help the church wait for God to speak. Instead, they will speak

⁵⁵ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 13.

⁵⁶ Using the word “soul” assumes a view of humanity that is not limited to the material. Soul can be defined as 1: the immaterial essence, animating principle or actuating cause of an individual life or 2: the spiritual principle embodied in human beings, all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe. Merriam-Webster. “Soul.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul>

⁵⁷ William James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 29.

⁵⁸ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 23-46. Jennings explores three fragments: the fragment formed by faith, the fragment formed by colonial power, and the fragment born out of the work of reduction.

⁵⁹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 44.

“authoritatively” about God and for God. Even if they use poetic language, it will be in defense of their formulas.

Pastor poets do not seek mastery of the mystery of God but rather seek to weave together the fragments of life in a way that helps the church remain open to God’s action, an “open take.” Their weaving together of fragments is not to explain what can be seen but to point to meaning beyond the material. In this way, they are sacramental poets. Regina Mara Schwartz writes, “Sacramental poetry points to a meaning greater than and beyond itself.”⁶⁰ She defines sacramental poetry as language that “does not contain what it expresses; rather, it expresses far more than it contains.”⁶¹ A pastor poet needs to develop a way of being in ministry that assists the church in looking beyond the *immanent frame* so that the church can continue to trust and wait for God.

Root argues that the way forward is for the pastor to remember that their primary vocation is prayer. For Root, prayer centers God and not humanity, “Because God is a speaking God, we are invited to pray. Prayer is central only because God speaks, sees, and hears.”⁶² Prayer viewed this way is to remain open to expecting divine action to take place. However, too often the way we pray and teach others to pray is rooted in our desires and done in a way that leaves no possibility for God to speak. In order to be pastor poets, we must be people who learn to pray with an openness to God.

To do this, I suggest that the Psalms are a rich resource to develop poetic prayers. This is not only due to the fact the Psalms are poetic by nature but also because they teach us to be open to God’s action—to be in dialogue with God and wait for his response after we pour out our hearts. There are numerous ways that praying and using the Psalms will assist us in being pastor poets.⁶³

As an example, let us look at Psalm 13. The questions the psalmist asks help us learn how to remain open to God’s action. Psalm 13 begins, “How long will you forget me, LORD? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (v. 1, CEB) These questions are not hypothetical; they are honest inquiries addressed to God. Later in the psalm, the writer demands, “Look at me! Answer me, LORD, my God! Restore sight to my

⁶⁰ Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 6.

⁶¹ Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 6.

⁶² Root, *Pastor in A Secular Age*, 275.

⁶³ For ways the Psalms can be prayed, see, Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2007)

eyes!" (v. 3, CEB) The psalmist offers a direct challenge and expects an answer from God. The psalm ends with a declaration of trust, "But I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation." (v. 5 CEB)

This might lead one to view the psalm as providing a formulaic answer or a guarantee that everything will work out in the end. However, Robert Davidson warns us against reading too much into the shift from verse 4 to verse 5. He writes, "Is the storm now over, with the psalmist sailing again on a placid sea? There is no reason to believe so. The storm may still be raging, but in the midst of the storm, there is a reassuring presence."⁶⁴ The task of the pastor poet is to teach the community to pray questions, demand answers, and then wait for God to speak. While we wait, the pastor poet can also be a reassuring presence reminding the community that God does indeed speak. The pastor can also lead the church community to listen and speak into one another's lives from their own experiences of waiting on God.

Remember, the pastor poet still prays from within the *immanent frame*, the same cultural context as the faith community. This means that the temptation exists to pray as if the world is closed to God's action. There remains the ongoing temptation to view prayer as mastery and use it as a tool of therapy that replaces transcendence. So, pastor poets must develop in their own prayer lives prayers that reflect true openness to God. Paying attention to and letting the questions of the psalms form us will help us teach our communities to pray openly to the transcendent God.

Resonance and the Poet Pastor

One of the wonderful gifts of poetry is that it gives us words to express the full experience of being human. Good poetry is not limited to "happy" poetry. The accelerated pace of life and the constant looking towards the future for the "good life" has created a culture in our churches where loss and death are rarely addressed. This impulse to ignore or move quickly through the painful experience of life actually hinders us from experiencing the fullness of life. The good life that we all seek cannot be experienced when we deny parts of our humanity. The dialectic of faith suggests that the good life cannot be experienced without the cross. Root writes, "In resonance, relationship can be generated in and through suffering. 'Negative' emotions such as sadness and loneliness can be the

⁶⁴ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 52.

locale of resonance...There is a fullness in the sadness that comes upon us as we listen to a beautiful piece of music and grieve love lost.”⁶⁵ The pastor poet must help the community pay attention to the brokenness of our lives so that we might experience God—to see the poetry of hurt, pain, and sadness.

To do this, the pastor poet will need to be willing to address their own brokenness and pain. M. Craig Barnes writes, “As poets, pastors aren’t afforded the luxury of skimming over the top of their own losses, thinking, ‘That was no big deal.’ The big deal is learning how to dig through loss to find the hints of hope—not a cheery optimism, but deep, from-the-bottom-of-the-soul-hope.”⁶⁶ One might hear this as an invitation for the pastor to find a therapist, which might be necessary. The pastor may need someone to help process trauma and treat mental health issues and should be supported in seeking therapy. However, the pastor poet recognizes that redemption does not come from within but rather from Jesus, the God who arrives. Therapy’s focus on the interior reveals the influence of the *immanent frame*. For the pastor poet, digging through loss is not an attempt to master it but rather to trust that through it, we will meet God. And in our meeting God, we will be better prepared to help others meet God.

The pastor poet can do this by speaking to and caring for the church from the dialectic of the cross, reminding the church that life is found in death. This sounds simple enough, but in practice, it is a difficult task. To claim that life is ultimately found in and through death sounds foolish in a secular world. This should come as no surprise to the pastor poet. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul admits that the cross is foolishness in the eyes of the world’s wisdom. The Christian claim that life is found in death makes little sense in a secular world that creates meaning around the material. Death is to be avoided and conquered through human ingenuity and reliance on science. However, the pastor poet sees the futility of such confidence and efforts and instead invites the church to trust the dialectic of faith and wait for God to act in history again, even in the face of death and tragedy.

Speaking confidently of hope and God’s arrival, though, runs the danger of leading the pastor to speak from “cheery optimism” and mastery. Pastors speak too often as if God’s action is predictable and controllable. They are unable to sit in the ambiguity waiting for God and so rush to speak in ways that hinder people from truly finding God in the suffering. They

⁶⁵ Root, *Churches and The Crisis of Decline*, 170.

⁶⁶ Barnes, *Pastor as Minor Poet*, 47.

offer clichés and confidence when people need honesty and silence. The pastor poet must develop hopeful language that communicates trust but does not negate the experiences of loss and death.

The pastor poet recognizes that resonance with God and with others can be found through the articulation of our experiences of suffering and death. The pastor poet must remind the church that triumphalism and ignoring the brokenness of life will lead to alienation and the destruction of relationships. Pastor poets must remind themselves that their task is to pray and wait for God and help their congregations to do the same. Also, the pastor has the unique opportunity to help their churches develop their own “open takes” in order to name God’s actions in their lives.

Conclusion

The church does not need pastors to be CEOs or celebrities. We do not need more managed resources and programs to gauge our success. We do not need more brand recognition or better publicity. Church growth and comparison are not the way forward for pastors or churches. These will only lead to more burnout and cultural irrelevance. To continue to pastor in the secular age, pastors will need to find new ways of seeing the world. They will need to find ways to wait for and name God’s action in the world and help the community to do the same.

The pastor poet must recognize that mastery of the mystery does not lead to the good life, nor does ignoring the brokenness of people’s experiences. The church community does not need pastors to give formulaic answers, but rather pastors who are willing to ask hard questions, ask God boldly for answers, and wait for God to speak in hopes of experiencing resonance with God and each other. We need pastors who approach the world with openness, who trust God still speaks in the world and will let God speak for Godself. The pastor poet will live in the tension of the Christian dialectic that true life is found in and through death.

Burnout is not only a reality for pastors, our socially accelerated world is experiencing it along with pastors. People do not need a church that competes for time and resources but that invites the alienated world to true relationship with God, in Christ, through the Spirit, and with each other. Pastors who understand themselves as poets have much to offer in our secular world.

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