

Paper Title: Teaching Students to Embody Redemptive Social Transformation:  
Christian Educational Theory and Methods for Higher Education

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This paper was prepared for “Science and Religion: Global Perspectives”, June 4-8, 2005, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute ([www.metanexus.net](http://www.metanexus.net)).

Abstract:

Christian social activists are expressing concern about two phenomena:

- \* the loss of hard-won gains in issues such as disarmament, environmental protection, and poverty reduction,

- \* the burnout rate in their ranks.

This paper addresses the question: How can Christian institutions of higher learning teach the cognitive skills needed to work effectively for nonviolent transformation of culture over the long haul?

I first trace the development of my convictions about the direction in which higher educational theory and curricular reform for Christian faith-based social activism should move. These convictions are:

*Teaching methods and curricula flow out of theories about how human beings learn. These learning theories are grounded, tacitly or explicitly, in assumptions about the relationship between the body and the mind. Most current neuroscience reflects views of human nature that are not grounded in the hard body/mind, feeling/thought, and mortal flesh/immortal soul dualisms that have shaped most mainstream Western faith-based educational theories. If educators were to take the embodied nature of all learning more seriously, the curricula and teaching methods that would result would be more effective in teaching the cognitive re-patterning necessary to creatively re-envision and transform the conflict that social activism inevitably entails.*

I next review one facet of two semesters of teaching a meditation curriculum to Protestant seminarians involved in social action and/or social service field work – or who were considering such vocations. This praxis-reflection research was based upon the following practical theological proposal:

*Meditation practices taught by Ignatius Loyola (the sixteenth-century Spanish founder of the Jesuits) and Thich Nhat Hanh (the twentieth-century Vietnamese founder of the Zen Tiep Hien order) can be complementary, theologically appropriate means for*

*training Americans in Christian congregations and educational institutions to persevere effectively in peace and justice ministries.*

The meditation curriculum I designed was grounded in practical theologian James Loder's theories about the neurological bases for imagining cultural change. He constructed these theories using Anthony Wallace's anthropological research on seers envisioning "ways out" of cultural crises, and upon neuroscience responses to Wallace published by Lex, d'Quili and others between 1967 and 1990. My curriculum attempted to teach students to foster the neurological flexibility exhibited by these visionaries in crisis situations, but to do so incrementally over time.

Student responses suggest that *kataphatic, ergotropic* Ignatian meditations upon biblical narratives and images, and *apophatic, trophotropic* Zen meditations which foster detachment from habitual narratives and images, may be able to mutually reinforce creative problem-solving, emotional resilience, and altruistic convictions. In this paper I examine student reflections about practicing Zen meditation upon the breath in a learning context which included:

- 1) Ignatian imaginative entry into biblical narratives about individual and/or social transformation,
- 2) Journaling about the connections between meditation practices, self- knowledge, communication, and social action.

The "soft" sciences of psychology, anthropology and sociology have been the favored conversation partners for practical theologians. My project suggests that hard science data from neuro-anatomy and physiology can, when used to inform praxis-reflection educational research, be a fruitful resource for Christian educators constructing higher education curricula.

Biography:

Sandra Costen Kunz is completing a dissertation in Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary which involves interdisciplinary work between four streams of disciplined thought about the cognitive/affective aspects of creative problem-solving and spiritual discernment:

- 1) neuroscience research using neural mapping techniques,
- 2) Christian theological anthropology as articulated by practical theologians,
- 3) the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist tradition of meditation taught by Thich Nhat Hanh,
- 4) the Ignatian tradition of meditation taught by Jesuits.

Her interest in the neurological bases for problem-solving began in Vanderbilt's psychology honors program. The research she envisioned then was impossible, because neural mapping technologies were quite clumsy. Her inquiry was driven by watching colleagues in faith-based social activism burn out when unable to discover solutions to intractable problems.

She obtained teacher certification and a secondary education MAT at The College of New Jersey and works for Princeton's public schools one-on-one with students having special problems.

The 1998 PTS Practical Theology Prize supported her research at three Jesuit universities, including Sophia University in Tokyo, and at Thich Nhat Hanh's monasteries in France, Vermont, and California. She was trained in Ignatian meditation by George Schimmel, SJ, and completed Shalem Institute's residential "Leading Contemplative Prayer Groups and Retreats" program.

Paper:

### **I. Problem, Project, Overall Argument, Particular Proposal**

American Christians engaged in faith-based social activism are expressing concerns about two current distressing phenomena:

- the rapid loss of hard-won gains in issues such as disarmament, environmental protection, and poverty reduction,
- the burnout rate in their ranks.

Although I'm convinced that the current political milieu and other socio-cultural conditions have contributed to the fact that these two phenomena have become particularly acute recently in America, I do not think these problems are limited to the US. Nor do I believe that the difficulty Christians are now finding with sustaining effective social action longterm is simply a current phenomenon. This paper thus addresses a question that I believe is, and has been, critical for Christian educational theorists globally: *How do we teach students in Christian institutions of higher learning the skills to work for cultural transformation that reflects the mission of God – and to do such work effectively over the long haul?* This question is grounded in the conviction (which is, indeed, articulated in the mission statements of many Christian institutions of higher learning) that part of the calling of Christian schools is to teach their students to continue Jesus' actions by reforming their own society and the world after the pattern of God's creativity and passion, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This paper will suggest some answers to this question in light of a praxis-reflection research project I conducted between 2002 and 2004 for my dissertation in Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. This project involved designing and teaching a combined Ignatian-Zen meditation curriculum to M.Div. and M.A. students at Princeton Seminary who were working in field education placements involving social action, social service, and/or peace and justice ministry – or who envisioned doing such ministry after graduation. The curriculum was taught as an elective track in two Christian Education courses. These were ED101: Introduction to Christian Education, Fall 2002, taught by Profs. Richard Osmer and Kenda Dean and ED 220: The Gospel in Unexpected Sources, Fall 2003, taught by Prof. John Stewart. Students submitted anonymous feedback sheets midway through the program and a final reflection paper. I recorded my own reflections. Although this was not part of my dissertation

research project, during this time I also taught a significantly revised version of this Ignatian-Zen meditation curriculum as an elective track within an upper level theology course I taught at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia entitled "Spiritual Disciplines in Comparative Perspective."

I constructed this project in order to provide praxis-reflection research data to support the two primary arguments in my dissertation. Entitled "Sustaining Redemptive Social Action: Intertwining Zen and Ignatian Meditation for Christian Discernment," my dissertation presents an overall argument about the direction in which I believe Christian education theory and curricular reform should move. I also defend a particular proposal which applies this argument to teaching students in Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries how to persevere in peace and justice ministries. My overall argument is this:

*Teaching methods and curricula flow out of theories about how human beings learn. These learning theories are grounded, tacitly or explicitly, in assumptions about the relationship between the body and the mind.<sup>1</sup> Most biblical and current mainstream neuroscience language reflects views of human nature that are not grounded in the hard body/mind, feeling/thought, and mortal flesh/immortal soul dualisms that have exerted a tremendous influence upon most post-Nicene Western Christian educational theories. If Christian educators were to take the embodied nature of all learning more seriously, the curricula and teaching methods that would result would be more effective in teaching Christians to re-pattern their lives in accordance with Jesus' teaching and example. The need for such re-patterning becomes especially obvious when faced with the stress and conflict that social action ministry inevitably entails.*

My particular constructive practical theological proposal is this:

*When taught together in light of Jesus' teachings in the gospels, Ignatian Christian meditation disciplines and Tiep Hien Buddhist meditation disciplines can be appropriate and complementary means for training Christians to strengthen their faith convictions and discern ways in which they can cooperate with the ongoing redemptive action of God within human cultures.*

Ignatian meditation practices were developed by Ignatius Loyola, a Spanish soldier-turned-religious-reformer, who founded the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The fundamental *Tiep Hien* practices are rooted in Rinzai Zen and Theravadin traditions, and were adapted in the 1960's for lay and monastic social activists in Vietnam by Thich Nhat Hanh, the abbot of a monastery in Hue.

I believe that the way in which congregational and Christian college and seminary curricula underemphasize the body's role within all the cognitive-affective processes of human learning hampers the imagination-based development of faith convictions and spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Current Western and Western-influenced parlance so clearly bifurcates the experience of one's self this way that it is difficult to refer to the issue without taking a tacit philosophical stand.

discernment skills. Conviction and discernment can protect well-meaning Christians from falling into the "Been there, done that, watched it flop" post-activist<sup>2</sup> syndrome of cynicism.

I'm defining spiritual discernment as a transformative process of divine-human cooperative imagination and action, focused upon reconfiguring the relationships between the actors and the other factors in a specific situation. In Christian spiritual discernment, this reconfiguration seeks to reflect the patterns of passionate, creative relationality manifested among the persons of the Trinity, between the Creator and creation, and between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ – especially the ways in which the character of these three patterns are revealed in Jesus' earthly ministry. Ignatian methods of spiritual discernment are rooted in the conviction that God is always acting redemptively in any situation. Christian spiritual discernment, as I am defining it, looks for signs of God's action to discover ways to act in harmony with that action. Like all learning processes, spiritual discernment involves brain-based perception, imagery, and affect. This can sound Pelagian, but I am convinced that Christian educators must begin with the created physicality of human learning hardware when teaching toward divine/human cooperative action.

## **II. Personal Background and Rationales for this Praxis-Reflection Research Project**

Growing up in Memphis, I absorbed a deep awareness of the need for nonviolent social action to transform social injustice, and of the risk that such nonviolent action could become a pretext for retaliatory violence. While volunteering as an undergraduate at the interracial, Christian communal Koinonia Farm in Georgia I asked Millard Fuller,<sup>3</sup> "How do you think up a nonviolent way to transform a violent situation?". I found his answer, "God will show you in the moment," unsatisfying at the time. When I followed up my initial question with another one, "How will God show me?", he responded, "If you don't know yet, all I can suggest is spending some time walking, sitting, and being silent in the woods over there," pointing to the pines beyond the pecan groves.

I was still unsatisfied. I assumed God had creative ideas. I didn't assume I'd be clear-headed enough to notice them. As a psychology major raised in the Reformed theological tradition, I believed part of this must involve using one's God-given brain and senses more effectively. I wanted to research the neurological bases for creative problem-solving for my honors project, but experiments related to this question conducted at Vanderbilt at that time involved what I saw as needless painful treatment of laboratory animals. The huge advances in neuroscience research methods since then have enabled me, in my current investigations, to draw upon non-invasive research in humans using neural mapping procedures.

During the same year I volunteered at Koinonia Farm, I found myself uncharacteristically, and somewhat awkwardly, unwilling to participate in a demonstration organized by my activist compatriots in the student government, of which I was then secretary. Calling for the elimination of the physical education requirement for the B.A. degree, my friends

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<sup>2</sup> and too often post-churched

<sup>3</sup> Fuller founded Habitat for Humanity.

spent a lark of an April afternoon performing push-ups, sit-ups, and deep knee bends en masse on the campus's central lawn – and passing out flyers that proclaimed the irrelevance of such practices for a liberal education. They denounced the paternalistic, *in loco parentis* attitude toward students that this requirement was interpreted as exemplifying.

I definitely had my pet peeves with the P.E. department, especially with the lack of options for women. But I had to admit to myself that I'd felt better – and had found more energy for activism aimed toward curricular reform in other areas – during the semesters I'd played soccer or swum laps. Although I'd never participated in yoga or other "bodywork" disciplines, it did seem to me that if we'd taken the time, we might have, as a student government, developed some creative new ways to encourage students to learn to use their bodies more skillfully to support their using their minds more skillfully – such as open-air calisthenics on the lawn – which were apparently a hit! (As my language betrays, I was still operating out of dualistic assumptions about the body and mind.) Simply eliminating the college's current clumsy attempt to acknowledge the embodied nature of its student body appeared to me to be an unwise problem-solving shortcut. I wondered if the body could be honored and trained within higher education curricula in a broader way than was then practiced by most universities and colleges, whether Christian or secular.

A decade later I posed my earlier question about nonviolent transformation of violent situations to Gerald May, then co-director of Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, DC. By that time I'd become convinced that some of the many complex reasons that so many of my acquaintances who had formerly been involved in Christian social activism had dropped out could be traced back to the "mind/body" and "immortal soul/mortal body" dualisms taught, directly and indirectly, by the Christian communities in which our faith and activism had been nurtured. Our usual tendency to connect conviction and discernment only with the "mind" and "soul" – and not to connect thoughts, imagination, or feelings with our always-in-the-present-moment body – sometimes fostered lifestyles, attitudes, and interpersonal behaviors that did not support compassion-based social action over the long haul. Oscar Cullmann's book *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?: The Witness of the New Testament* had convinced me that such dualisms are not biblically-based, but have their roots in Greek, Augustinian, Thomist, Kantian, Hegelian, and other philosophical dualisms. I became increasingly aware that these dualisms had had as profound an influence upon the Christian education that I and my colleagues had imbibed as had the nondualistic theological anthropologies reflected in the Christian scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

Gerald May, who had published broadly on the inter-relationships between psychiatry, neuroscience, and spiritual growth, answered my question with, "You might study at Nyingma Institute<sup>5</sup> and with Thich Nhat Hahn." Having participated in some of Shalem's programs in

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<sup>4</sup> I do not have the space to review the burgeoning theological reconsideration of the "mind-body" problem in this paper, but will suggest for those new to the field that they begin with Gregory Peterson's *Minding God: Theology and the Human Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Nyingma in Berkeley is affiliated with Dharma Publishing, one the largest publishers in the world of academic works on Buddhist studies.

which May had combined Buddhist practices with Christian practices with immense theological integrity, I trusted his instincts.

I was soon overwhelmed, quite happily, by the culture shock of immersion in Berkeley Buddhism, and by the beautiful, but immensely alien, paraphernalia and language of Tibetan practices. Nyingma Institute was founded by Vajrayana Buddhist lama Tarthang Tulku in 1973. During its first two years its faculty included Huston Smith, Herbert Guenther, The Ven. Thich Thein-An, Claudio Naranjo, and Charles Tart. Its various curricula emphasize that clear thinking begins with physical alertness and relaxation. Most of its programs start with what its founder calls "Kum Nye," a combination of Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese bodywork practices. But the then-current director's total dismissal of "grace" as a factor in creative problem-solving clashed with my Christian conviction that spiritual discernment, while grounded in neurological processes, draws upon resources deeper and broader than any human resources.<sup>6</sup> God's present action is involved, I am convinced.

However much the director dismissed the possibility of grace, I was daily amazed, as I read the Luke's Gospel on the fire escape while the sun set over Sausalito, to find words and phrases from the Buddhist texts I'd been studying popping up in Jesus' sayings. This was especially noticeable if I focused upon the Greek text rather than upon the English translations to which I was accustomed. Out there on the fire escape, I began a long path of comparative interfaith study of texts and practices.

Thich Nhat Hanh, like his fellow-Buddhists at Nyingma Institute, also disavows theism. But his teachings, especially the narratives he weaves so skillfully, are grounded in the conviction that the entire universe – and not simply human intelligence – provides nonviolent answers for those who ask, seek, and knock. Although he speaks out of a Buddhist cosmology which is in many ways incommensurate, I believe, with a Christian cosmology, he does speak quite often, and quite freely, of the radical difference, and the radical interpenetration, of physical reality and what he terms "ultimate reality". He is fond of attributing to Paul Tillich an approach to theism he finds helpful in discussions with Christians, an approach that assumes "Ultimate reality can not be accurately described as personal, but it is not less than personal."<sup>7</sup>

In response to my question about discovering nonviolent solutions within violent situations, Nhat Hanh sent me back into the woods (this time the ivy-covered oaks at his monastery in Bordeaux) to walk, sit, and be silent. But he gave me and all the other would-be social transformers at Plum Village some very specific directions for developing clear-headed awareness of all the action going on around me – and inside my head. I soon arrived at a new appreciation for Fuller's earlier advice that "God will show you in the moment."

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that neither Nyingmapa Buddhism as a whole, nor Nyingma Institute in particular, rule out nonhuman resources in creative problem-solving. My concern was the strong emphasis at that time which held that looking outside oneself for problem-solving resources was, at least initially, a dodge from doing the intellectual growth that was called for.

<sup>7</sup> dharma talks and question and answer sessions at Plum Village, France.

## II. Practical Theological Rationales and Background for this Praxis-Reflection Research Project

In my first doctoral seminar in Practical Theology at Princeton Seminary, James Loder, Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education, mentioned Anthony Wallace's anthropological research on "revitalization movements" in which seers, who having entered various types of meditative or trance states, had envisioned corporate paths out of cultural crises and into social renewal.<sup>8</sup> Given the cross-cultural, multi-faith breadth of Wallace's work, and its focus upon social transformation, I was instantly intrigued. I was even more intrigued when I read the chapter in *The Knights Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science*<sup>9</sup>, which Loder co-authored with physicist Jim Neidhardt, in which they outline tentative explanations of what might have been happening neurologically during these visions, and suggest theological interpretations. Loder and Neidhardt base this chapter upon work published between 1967 and 1990 in response to Wallace's initial paper by various neuroscientists and others interested in science-theology dialogue.

In their evaluation of Wallace's work, Loder and Neidhardt draw particularly upon an article entitled "Neurological Bases of Revitalization Movements" published by Barbara Lex,<sup>10</sup> who was an associate in psychiatry and anthropology at Harvard Medical School when this article was first published in *Zygon* in 1978. This issue of *Zygon*, entitled *New Biocultural Explanations of the Persistence and Power of Religion* also included a related article by Eugene d'Aquili entitled "The Neurological Bases of Myth and Concepts of Deity,"<sup>11</sup> one of earliest articles published in the stream of research now often referred to as "neurotheology."<sup>12</sup> I think that a significant amount of the current research and writing involving religious perspectives upon the biocultural and neurophysiological roots of human behavior and upon the human biological potentials for transformation<sup>13</sup> can be traced in part to the research drawn upon, and pointed toward, by this issue of *Zygon*.

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," in William Armand Lessa and Evon Zarman Vogt, eds., *A Reader in Comparative Religions: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), 503-512. Wallace mentioned many examples of such movements from many cultures, but his later work, and that of those who followed after him in "revitalization" research, has often focused upon Native American movements and addiction recovery movements. For recent examples of research in this vein see William White, "Transformational Change: A Historical Review," *JCPL/In Session* 60, no. 5 (2004), 461-470 and at [www.interscience.wiley.com](http://www.interscience.wiley.com), and Matthew Orr, "Environmental Decline and the Rise of Religion," *Zygon* 38, no. 4, (December, 2003), 895-910. It is interesting that Orr ignores the importance of profound, extraordinary, and transformative individual visionary experience in catalyzing these movements, especially given the attention to this aspect of Wallace's schema demonstrated by Wallace himself and the earlier conversation about "revitalization" carried on within *Zygon*.

<sup>9</sup> James E. Loder and W. Jim Neidhardt, "The Intelligibility of Transformation: Kierkegaard and the Journey of Intensification," in *The Knight's Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science*. Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Lex, "Neurological Bases for Revitalization Movements," *Zygon* 13, no. 4 (December 1978): 276-312.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene d'Aquili, "The Neurological Bases of Myth and Concepts of Deity," *Zygon* 13, no. 4 (December 1978): 257-275.

<sup>12</sup> e.g. the later work of d'Aquili, Andrew Newberg, and Joseph Rhawn.

<sup>13</sup> for example, the research highlighted at Metanexus Institute's 2003 conference "Works of Love: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Altruism" and recent projects funded by The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. The Templeton Institute's invitation for me to participate as a guest at its 2002 workshop



Having correlated these articles and other neurological explanations for trance states<sup>14</sup> with Abraham Heschel's hypotheses about the internal experience of the Hebrew prophets,<sup>15</sup> and with Paul Ricoeur's hypotheses about the "Voice-behind-the-voice" and resulting dialectical identity operative in biblical writers,<sup>16</sup> Loder and Neidhardt explore the physiology of culturally transformative visions. They argue that passionate desire for social and personal coherence, and relief from the pain of social breakdown, drives the limbic system to potentiate a highly unusual linkage of central nervous system and autonomic nervous system networks. I will summarize their explanation of the neurophysiology in the rest of this and the following paragraph. Two aspects of the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic (alertness-enhancing) and parasympathetic (rest-enhancing), usually work in a more or less reciprocal manner, so if one "turns up" the other "turns down". The more complex ergotropic and trophotropic systems in which the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems play a role also work, generally, in a similar balancing fashion. The ergotropic system links analytical, linear, linguistically-oriented left-brain central nervous system areas with the sympathetic nervous system to produce the intense awareness of the external world needed to produce a quick, sequentialized series of responses in situations of threat – or to achieve highly specific goals. The trophotropic system pairs holistic, analogical, spatially-oriented right-brain central nervous system areas with the parasympathetic system to perform maintenance tasks of eating, sleeping, relaxing, and consolidating learning.

Usually functioning in a more or less on/off manner, when both systems are continually driven by the extraordinary passion of the visionary's zeal, they eventually overload and, as a result, begin to fire simultaneously. The neurophysiological result is that holistic, right-brain images, which are usually chopped up and serialized as they enter the left brain via the connecting corpus colosum, can be transmitted into the left brain with their holistic aura intact, via the highly aroused limbic system. The primarily midbrain limbic system can be called the seat of most emotions. The result of this highly unusual neural networking can be powerful visions, which manifest both the clarity of detail and "realism" often characteristic of left-brain functions and the aura of well-being and universality often characteristic of right-brain functions. In Wallace's research, he interpreted the content of these ecstatic experiences as alternative visions of the seers' "social mazeway," in other words, visions of how their cultures could reimagine and transform themselves. These visions effected such profound personal transformations upon the visionaries<sup>17</sup> that they were able to take concrete steps to draw other members of their cultures into a commitment to effect these new social mazeways.

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"Exploring Prayer and Spiritual Formation during Adolescence," which developed, in part, out of Loder's and Kenda Creasy Dean's interest in the topic, was extremely important in the design of my research project. So was Metanexus' Institute's generosity in supporting my participation in their Works of Love Conference.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. the work of E. Gellhorn and Victor Turner – and Charles D. Laughlin, John McManus, and Eugene d'Aquili's book *Brain, Symbol and Experience* (Boston: New Science Library, 1990), chap. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper&Row, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review*, 70 (January-April 1977): 1-37.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. spontaneous freedom from longterm addictions.

At the end of this chapter, Loder and Neidhardt point out what they see as the important systematic and practical theological implications of this human physiological capacity for imagining and effecting social change. Adopting and adapting Kierkegaard's language, they speak of this neurological process as "the journey of intensification". They hypothesize that similar neurological processes may be involved in incremental spiritual growth, and point to Kierkegaard's image of the "knight of faith"<sup>18</sup> as a model of someone who through "mundane ecstasy" transforms the world around him.

Unlike Wallace, Loder and Neidhardt attribute the positive cultural transformations via this neurological pattern, whether immediate or incremental, to the providence of God's endowment of human beings with: 1) the neurological hardware to enable such visions, and 2) the human spirit's capacity to develop the freedom to choose how its neurological capacities will be directed. Although neurological research on meditative and trance states has advanced far beyond that which Loder and Neidhardt cite in *The Knight's Move*, I believe that their descriptions in this book of the overall processes involved, and the theological conclusions they draw, can still be powerful sources for practical theologians designing curricula for Christian higher education. My dissertation project was in part an experiment in designing a curriculum to foster the kind of neurological flexibility exhibited by the visionaries whose social action Wallace recounted – within the context of the more mundane "stepping away" from unconscious self-absorption that meditation practice fosters.

In a chapter in his later book *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective*,<sup>19</sup> Loder expands upon his earlier work on "intensification" via interpreting the transformation of the life of a doctoral student he refers to as "Helen". She was referred to him for therapy as part of Loder's clinical work as an ordained pastoral counselor in the New Brunswick Presbytery. After studying the connections between Freud's and Kierkegaard's theories of human development in his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard, Loder did a clinical postdoctoral fellowship working between psychiatry and theology at the Menninger Clinic. His theory of cultural transformation through convicting vision thus grew, in part, out of his clinical experience.

In this later case-based reflection on "the journey of intensification" in *The Logic of the Spirit*, Loder correlates Wallace's stages of the visionary's experience with what Loder calls the "classical tradition of spiritual development"<sup>20</sup> which he saw as having the four stages of awakening, purgation, illumination, and unification. He thus, in this chapter, reflects upon Wallace's work using the terminology of usually often employed in theological, religious studies, and other disciplinary approaches to mystical experience.<sup>21</sup> And he uses Wallace's categories to

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<sup>18</sup> Loder and Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move*, 279. This image is found in Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walther Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 49-51.

<sup>19</sup> James E. Loder, "Human Development Reenvisioned: The Case of Helen," in *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 46-78.

<sup>20</sup> Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> For a beautiful consideration of Loder's work in the light of various approaches to mystical spirituality see Eolene Boyd-MacMillan's article entitled "Loder and Mystical Spirituality: Particularity, Universality, and Intelligence" in *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology: Essays in Honor of James E. Loder*, ed. Dana R. Wright and James D. Kuenzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). My initial work on Loder's "journey of

describe Helen's more gradual process of transformation. Her experience did, in fact, involve a series of visionary experiences that were, eventually, entered into intentionally as a means of profound problem-solving. In a paper I will be presenting to the Mysticism Group at AAR's 2005 convention, I will examine this aspect of Loder's work on the "journey of intensification" and will review how well Loder's theories of the neurological bases of this "journey" hold up in light of more recent neurological research on meditative and trance states. I do not have the space to review this more recent neurological research in this paper.

Another difference between Loder's later discussion of intensification in *The Logic of the Spirit* and his earlier work in *The Knight's Move* is that in the chapter following his review of Helen's transformation he immediately frames her experience in terms of his own five-part paradigm of "the logic of transformation" by which the human spirit "recomposes its world" via the use of the imagination. This five-step process, which can be entered into at any step, involves:

- 1) conflict
- 2) scanning
- 3) insight
- 4) release of energy and repatterning
- 5) proving out the insight.

As Loder describes it succinctly: "The transformational dynamic begins in *conflict*, moves through a *scanning* phase, comes up with an *insight* that resolves the conflict, and *releases the energy* bound up with it in a "Eureka!" *repatterning* of the self-world relationality and *proving out* of the adequacy of the resolution."<sup>22</sup> In his previous writing, for example, *The Transforming Moment*,<sup>23</sup> Loder had applied this fivefold paradigm to intellectual tasks as mundane as everyday problem-solving and as complex as quantum leaps in scientific theory or Martin Luther's conversion.

Loder's interest in the "spiritual logic" of social transformation has been revealed more in the work of his students than in his own publications.<sup>24</sup> He was prevented, by his focus on other projects,<sup>25</sup> and ultimately by his sudden death in November 2001, from publishing about the connections between neuroscience, theology and social transformation once the research on problem-solving and meditation that used neurological mapping techniques matured, during the very last years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. My dissertation is, in part, an attempt to extend and apply his work in this trajectory.

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intensification" was written for the yearlong doctoral seminar on Loder's work that Dana Wright taught at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2001-2002. His comments were immensely helpful.

<sup>22</sup> Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). A second edition with additional introductory and concluding chapters was published by Helmers and Howard (Colorado Springs) in 1989.

<sup>24</sup> e.g. the work of Daniel Schipanni, Susanne Johnson, and of my colleagues Thomas Hastings and Ajit Prasadam.

<sup>25</sup> He did, however, continue to teach about this research in his doctoral seminars at Princeton Theological Seminary

### III. Cultural Background and Rationales for this Praxis-Reflection Project

Continuing the ministry of Jesus via social action is one of the stated goals of Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>26</sup> Sustaining transformative social action longterm is also a stated aim of the meditation practices taught by Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>27</sup> During America's occupation of Vietnam, he founded a school for social service. It trained Vietnamese youth to do rural development and reconstruction in villages destroyed by the war. Leaving his homeland to teach at Princeton and Columbia, his friendship and writings encouraged Martin Luther King, Jr., Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Thomas Merton and other American Christian social activists. He returned to Vietnam, and in 1966 founded the *Tiep Hien* order (Order of Interbeing). Its first lay and monastic members dedicated themselves to what he termed "engaged Buddhist" precepts and action. When exiled from his homeland, he settled in France. In 1967 King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

When Jesuit Daniel Berrigan finished his prison term for civil disobedience protesting the Vietnamese War, he lived with Nhat Hanh in France. They co-authored *The Raft Is Not the Shore*,<sup>28</sup> their taped conversations about Christian and Buddhist approaches to peace and justice activism. Both Jesuit and *Tiep Hien* training methodologies insist that one cannot continue to successfully negotiate peace and justice *externally* among the contentious voices raised in any social problem unless one has first learned – via meditation practice – to negotiate peace and justice *internally* among the contentious voices raised within one's own human consciousness.

Ignatius and Nhat Hanh both teach a variety of meditation practices. But the fundamental Ignatian practices are: 1) imaginative entry into biblical narratives and images, 2) imaginative, image-filled recollection of one's concrete emotional responses to one's experiences and actions throughout the day. Nhat Hahn's fundamental practices teach attention to the concrete physicality of one's breath. This "one-pointed" attention to the body in the present moment teaches detachment from habitual, culture-bound, reductionist images and interpretations of:

- a) the external social and natural environment,
- b) one's internal affective/cognitive environment.

Initial instruction in Ignatian meditation is focused upon *kataphatic* practices that emphasize active, ergotropic use of sequential mental language and imagery, while initial instruction in *Tiep Hien* meditation is focused upon *apophatic*, restful, trophotropic detachment from the linear flow of mental language and imagery. The goal of the combined use of these

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<sup>26</sup> for two of the most recent commentaries upon/guides to directing *The Spiritual Exercises* see William A. Barry, SJ, *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001) and Marian Cowan and John C. Futrell, *Companions in Grace: Directing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> for some of Nhat Hanh's clearest and most recent work pointing out the connections between meditation practice and social change see his *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Nhat Hanh, Thich and Daniel Berrigan, SJ., *The Raft is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

meditation techniques in the curriculum I developed was definitely not to induce the sort of visionary trance states that Wallace recounted, and, as far as I know, these were never the result! The written reflections of the students in the meditation courses I taught, and the published works of other Ignatian-Zen practitioners, call attention to five more modest results from practicing these two cognitive disciplines together. In the final chapter of my dissertation I will thus suggest that when taught in a coherent manner, such combined practice can:

- 1) teach Christians to deconstruct prevailing cultural myths which offer inaccurate interpretations of "what's happening in my society and in the world – and why,"
- 2) offer them methods for "changing their minds" by replacing these seldom-articulated myths with the worldview and cultural critique offered by Jesus in the gospels,
- 3) strengthen their belief in the veracity of Jesus' claim that "God's reign is at hand," or as Martin Luther King preached, "the universe bends toward justice."<sup>29</sup>
- 4) sharpen their acuity in noticing their own and others' emotional reactions, so that they can respond to disturbing emotions and behavior quickly with compassion, instead of responding with repression or other unconstructive defense mechanisms,
- 5) increase their ability to perceive the details in a particular social context that allow for systemic change, or as James Loder put it, "discover the joints that hold the whole oppressive system together – and find the 'way in' to unhinge those joints,"<sup>30</sup>

Benefits # 1-3 are matters of conversion, a fundamental reorientation of convictions. Benefits # 4-5 are crucial foundations for spiritual discernment. I am claiming that both religious conviction and spiritual discernment are imagination-based, embodied, and learned forms of human awareness. My research has convinced me that together they can help prevent social ministry burnout. I propose that training in such combined practice could be immensely useful in Christian colleges and seminaries in two particular settings:

- 1) vocational discernment services – I argue that such an approach is much more theologically responsible than the usual career-planning and placement services, and that this approach can be very helpfully augmented by meditation training.
- 2) service learning or field placement programs involving social service or social activism – I argue that such a curriculum can give students tools for responding to the conflict and emotion-laden experiences usually involved in such work, and give them an arena for peer reflection upon their experiences in their placements in light of biblical narratives that can nourish hope-filled conviction.

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<sup>29</sup> Angie O'Gorman, ed., *The Universe Bends Toward Justice: A Reader on Christian Nonviolence in the US*, (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 6.

<sup>30</sup> comment during "History and Method of Practical Theology" seminar, Fall 1999.

My praxis-reflection research project frames the discouragement of many Christian social activists against the backdrop of two challenges to traditional Western Christian conceptions of human nature, human learning, and human ethics. The first is the increasing influence of Buddhist thought and meditation practices. The second is the increasing scholarly and popular<sup>31</sup> influence of neuroscience research. Both are having profound effects upon Christian theological anthropology<sup>32</sup> and upon the ways in which Christian educators are already teaching spiritual formation.<sup>33</sup>

Due to the increasing influence of Buddhism upon American culture, and the desire to "get in touch with the body" and "discipline the mind," Christian practices are already being reshaped in light of Buddhist thought and practice. But this borrowing is often *tacit, haphazard and unintentional*.

By offering theological and neurological reasons why *Tiep Hien* practices complement Western Christian meditation methods, and by offering tested methods for teaching Zen practices in Christian contexts, I hope to provide Christian educators with curricula that are *explicit, careful and intentional* in their use of Buddhist thought and practice. Andrew Walls argues that for any cultural practice to be useful longterm in supporting the redemptive divine-human action which Jesus embodied, it needs to be turned, or converted, toward the pattern of Jesus: his prophetic ministry, death and resurrection.<sup>34</sup> My praxis-reflection research project attempted a conversion of Tiep Hien practices honoring the integrity of both religious traditions. I think Buddhism's current growing influence in the West is a providential opportunity for American practical theologians to correct nonbiblical dualisms in their theological anthropologies and resulting practices of ministry.

I expand Howard Gardner's definition of intellectual disciplines<sup>35</sup> by demonstrating that traditions of meditation developed in faith communities meet or exceed his criteria for intellectual disciplines. I insist that nonChristian meditation traditions should therefore be engaged as conversation partners by Christian practical theologians as seriously as secular post-Enlightenment academic disciplines<sup>36</sup> have been engaged.

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<sup>31</sup> On September 27, 2004, *Newsweek's* 35-page cover story was "The New Science of Mind & Body". The cover story of the March 2005 issue of *National Geographic* features a picture of a Tibetan lama with myriad electronic leads, hooked to a neural monitor, glued to his shaven head. The article (very briefly!) reviews neural mapping research on religious and meditative experience.

<sup>32</sup> see Part Two: "Minding Persons" in Gary R. Peterson, *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> for recent examples of books suggesting ways for Christians to benefit from Buddhist meditation practices see Kim Boykin, *Zen for Christians: A Beginner's Guide*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) and Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004) and Habito's just-released *Experiencing Buddhism: Ways of Wisdom and Compassion*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "Culture and Conversion in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000), 43-54.

<sup>35</sup> Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), Chapter 7.

<sup>36</sup> many of which have immensely shorter scholarly histories.

It should be noted that both the Ignatian and *Tiep Hien* meditation practices focused upon in my research are, while often practiced in a group context, individual practices. They are focused upon developing an individual's intellectual and spiritual flexibility. It should be noted that both the Jesuit order and the *Tiep Hien* order have developed careful group disciplines of conviction-building and discernment, and that both orders rely upon the wisdom of collective discernment when planning action for cultural transformation. I hope to expand the research I've begun in this dissertation project to include consideration of these important corporate practices. But it is important to remember that, for both groups, ongoing individual meditation practice is the ground upon which collective action for peace and justice is built.

#### **IV. Research for this Project**

I developed the curriculum for this praxis research project<sup>37</sup> as the final project as a student in Shalem Institute's eighteen-month residential "Leading Contemplative Prayer Groups and Retreats" program, which is accredited by Washington Theological Union. The 1998 Practical Theology Prize, awarded yearly by Princeton Theology Seminary to an M.Div. senior, supported textual and interview research at three Jesuit universities including Sophia University in Tokyo. Consultations with George Schimmel, SJ, who trained me in Ignatian meditation, and William Johnston, SJ were very helpful. This prize also supported research at *Tiep Hien's* monasteries in France, Vermont, and California. Prof. Wentzel van Huyssteen at Princeton Seminary offered direction in accessing cognitive science research.<sup>38</sup> My dissertation advisor is Richard Osmer, and my committee members are Kenda Creasy Dean and Richard Fox Young.

#### **V. Student Comments Upon Meditation Upon the Breath**

The curriculum I designed intertwined Ignatian mediation upon the Christian scriptures with Vietnamese Zen meditations focused upon the breath. The practices were introduced within a framework of Ignatius', Nhat Hanh's and Loder's theoretical teachings about the processes of intellectual-affective-spiritual maturation. Student feedback covered many topics, but I will focus upon the comments of several students about their experience of practicing "attention to the breath in the present moment," which is the basis of Nhat Hanh's approach to social, family, and cultural transformation.<sup>39</sup> I have chosen to look specifically at their responses to meditation upon the breath in this paper, because such attention to the actual sensations and kinesthetic experience of the body in the moment is only rarely considered, if at all, in designing curricula for Christian higher education. It is my hope that these students' thoughts may point toward the possibility of taking the embodied nature of all human learning more seriously if Christian schools are going to educate the human person as actually created by God.

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<sup>37</sup> I have benefited from Robert Stake's reflections upon qualitative case study research in his *The Art of Case Study Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1995) and more particularly from Johannes van der Ven's *Education for Reflective Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) and *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*. (Kampen, he Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> His unpublished 2004 Gifford lecture manuscripts have been extremely helpful.

<sup>39</sup> see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe! You Are Alive*, trans. Annabel Laity (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996) and *The Path of Emancipation* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2000).

All of the students whose anonymous comments I will quote had been involved in difficult social service or social action ministries: some of them involving situations of overt violence, all of them involving situations of structural violence. Several of the students were members of minority groups who experience structural violence on a regular basis.

Following are answers to the following question: "What practice that we have done have you found to be most nourishing to you – within the prayer group meetings?" I have chosen these from the answers which singled out the breath meditations as the most helpful practice:

*"The breathing exercises, focusing upon the breath . . . . It was very relaxing and helped me concentrate in peace better."*

*". . . the breathing meditation . . . I enjoy it because of its simplicity. It allows me to isolate the things that are on my mind or distracting me. It gives me a good sense of where my thoughts are dwelling."*

*"The idea of constantly monitoring my breathing has helped me to stay in the present. By acting in the present I am not weighed down by past problems and mishaps. {When} I have difficult situations where I need to make a critical decision, some of the breathing exercises help me focus on what is vitally important . . . ."*

*"the breathing exercise is fundamental for the beginning of any meditation period to get centered, slow down, and become aware of or purge thoughts."*

In answer to the question: "If you have been practicing outside the prayer group, which practices have seemed the most helpful to you?", I received the following responses, which again mentioned the breath meditations:

*"breathing meditation. It has useful in helping me slow down and relax after a long day."*

*"Again, I think the breathing meditation was most helpful in my own prayer life. It offered a different way to be still with God."*

*". . . I try to begin each morning with a few moments of breathing meditation before and after prayer. . . ."*

*"It is easy enough to teach myself. Also I am so busy that I lose sight of many things. Breathing meditation helps me recenter myself after a busy day."*

*"I can carry it wherever I go, and practice whenever I wish. I soon found that I would, without thinking, draw in a deep breath, not just when I heard the meditation bell ring, but when I heard a car backfire, doorbell ring, etc."*



*"It helps alleviate my anxiety when . . . in anxious situations, and it can give me respite from the constant bombardment of my thoughts."*

*"Breathing meditation helped me the most in calming my emotions when they start to get the better of me."*

*"The breathing meditation . . . especially during strenuous paper writing periods . . . "*

The following excerpts from students' final reflections upon the curriculum show the connections they made between the practices, the theological framework in which they were introduced, and their commitment to personal and social transformation. The first excerpt refers to "scanning": step # 2 in Loder's paradigm of the logic of transformation, noted above.

*"Thich Nhat Hanh's methods of 'stopping' and 'looking' through Buddhist practices of mindfulness and breath are wonderfully articulated . . . for touching the Spirit of Life.<sup>40</sup> These habits can prepare us for scanning a situation or problem while bringing us into full relationship and full awareness of our bodies, our selves, and our world, thereby creating a state of readiness so that upon receiving insight we can respond. In other words, breath meditation can deconstruct our normal expectations and rational world constructions so that we become open to inspiration. Making ourselves open and available, we set aside what we think should be done in a given situation or problem. We place ourselves in a state of readiness and awareness, confident that we will be able, from this stance, to discover where the Spirit of God is present and working in the world so that we can encourage and participate in this work."*

*"As a Christian, I have come to understand my faith in the effectiveness of Zen practice as faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit in every moment, in human breath, in human experience, and through one human to another. . . If the eternal God can be found in the present moment in the form of the Holy Spirit present with us in our experiences, then meditation is literally access to the living God working in the present moment . . . What greater hope exists for those of us who feel called to fight injustice and make change in the world? If we go about this work believing that we have no consistent practice for attempting to discern the will of God in our lives, our relationships, and in the world, then how can we ever continue this work against the overwhelming suffering and loss experienced by humans every day who we encounter."*

*"How is it that breathing meditation and contemplation can foster greater openness to discerning and cooperating with God's mission in a context of intense suffering? I believe that we must begin with the individual for it is the suffering individual (and all individuals suffer) who must first move beyond her own suffering before she can effectively work to alleviate the suffering of the rest of creation. It follows that first, meditation allows the individual time with herself. Ideally, then, she will watch her thoughts in a place of nonjudgment . . . . Second, as an individual becomes aware of her thoughts, she begins to look at what is. Thoughts arise out situations that occur in one's life. . . . {T}he Triune God comes to us in our life situations. Once this connection is made, an individual may begin to see that what is happening is somehow part*

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<sup>40</sup> Jurgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) was a text for one the courses in which I taught this meditation curriculum.

*of God's mission. . . We can watch the unfolding of the kingdom of God, and we can consciously respond to life's situations because we have taught ourselves to step out of a reactionary, victimized situation to one of empowerment grounded in compassion. The spirit of life becomes an intimate reality that invites us into its work."*

I think that meditation classes such as those in this project could fruitfully be combined with field work programs in seminaries and with service learning programs in Christian colleges and universities. Students would thus have the support of practices that can help them develop spiritual discernment skills. Such a "vocational discernment" approach seems to have more theological integrity than the current "career planning" approaches taken by many Christian schools. Students would also have the support of peer reflection upon their search to discover their unique calling within God's mission. Many ways of incorporating an approach to learning that is more aware of the embodied nature of all human learning is possible, but this application seems to be to be the one most easily implemented, and one which could easily have a profound effect in transforming both Christian congregations and the various global societies in which they are situated.

## **VI. Hoped-For Contributions to the Field of Practical Theology in General and to Christian Higher Education in Particular**

The "soft" sciences of psychology, anthropology and sociology have been the favored interdisciplinary conversation partners for practical theologians. I hope to demonstrate that hard science research on anatomy and physiology can be a fruitful resource for practical theological theory, especially for Christian educators. I argue that praxis-reflection research in practical theology which engages the hard sciences can contribute data to systematic theologians investigating questions such as body/mind and divine action/human action dualisms.

I also hope to exhibit the fruitfulness for practical theology of engaging in scholarly discourse not only with Western academic disciplines, but with nonWestern pedagogical traditions developed within Eastern faith communities. American-born yoga, xi gong, and Buddhist meditation instructors who are teaching at local Y's and health clubs are shaping the imaginations of many Christians (and thus their convictions and ethics) as much as congregational Christian education programs. Mainline Christian retreat centers feature instruction in nonChristian Eastern disciplines. Buddhist meditators are collaborating with some of the most credible neuroscientists in the US in research on learning and altruism,<sup>41</sup> in projects correlating first-person accounts of meditation with brain-mapping. Using the "constructing flexible practical theological rules of art" approach of Richard R. Osmer,<sup>42</sup> my dissertation

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<sup>41</sup> see [www.mindandlife.org](http://www.mindandlife.org).

<sup>42</sup> Richard Osmer, "Practical Theology as Argument, Rhetoric and Conversation," in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes Van der Ven, eds, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 113-139. Osmer has elaborated this approach most recently his forthcoming *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster, 2005). His incisive direction, during both my M.Div. and Ph.D. work, of my interdisciplinary research between Buddhist and Christian meditation practices and neurological research on meditation has consistently untangled the complex webs of thought involved in weaving together so many threads of academic and experiential inquiry.

suggests ways in which Christian educators can respond to each of these cultural changes as a positive resource, while remaining rooted in Jesus' teachings and in the conviction that the Triune God passionately desires to teach us to discern, welcome, build, and inhabit an eternal culture of peace.