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Practicing the Religious Self: Buddhist-Christian Identity as Social Artifact

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It is somewhat paradoxical to write or speak about identity formation in two religious traditions that ultimately deny the reality of any identity that we might claim or fashion for ourselves. In the Christian traditions, a person's true (or ultimate) identity is received through God's action and grace in baptism; to foreground any other facet of the self, or to anchor identity in anything but baptism, could be considered a form of idolatry. In the Buddhist traditions human identity is empty, woven not from an inherent or externally granted essence but through the interdependent arising of all things;¹ to cling to self and to identity as independent, enduring, immutable, or autonomous signals a mistaken understanding of reality.² Indeed, as religious scholar Alice Keefe has written, "belief in the self as independent and self-existent is our fundamental delusion and root poison."³

Yet day by day most of us experience our identities, including our religious, cultural, and social identities, as neither empty nor erased. On the contrary: they seem to be inscribed with enduring meaning. Knowledge has been chiseled into them through our participation in the rituals and relationships of the world. At times the very fullness of our identities can feel on the verge of overflowing. This sense of dynamic presence and fullness causes our identities to serve as important (and perhaps essential) tools for negotiating the hurly-burly of experience and relationship in the mundane, finite, material world.⁴ From this perspective, our religious identities are social artifacts, entities and meanings formed *in between*, or on the margins of, biological selves that are related to one another through communities of practice.⁵ These communal artifacts may then be interiorized by individuals as resources that can be employed in or offered back to the world—*performed*, if you will—through particular (and sometimes disciplined) practices.⁶

The primacy of social process in creating and maintaining religious identity implies that community remains central to the process of fashioning the religious self in contemporary Buddhist and Christian practice. If this is true, it raises, of course, important questions about our understandings of ecclesiology and the nature of the sangha, theological anthropology and Buddhist understandings of the person. These ques-

tions deserve to be answered, but they are too broad to be addressed here. My more modest intention is to contribute to generative conversation about religious identity formation by illustrating how my own religious identities as Buddhist and Christian have been practiced and performed as social artifacts in two particular instances. In a secondary sense, this essay serves as a reflection on pastoral work in a multifaith context, something “much needed in the Buddhist-Christian studies milieu.”⁷

Given the diverse academic approaches to Buddhist-Christian studies, it seems wise to begin by describing my own background and approach. By training I am a pastoral theologian, someone who seeks to understand critically the richness and complexity of human experiences and then to respond with appropriate, faithful, and effective acts of care. The psychological meta-theory of social constructionism serves as a primary conversation partner for my work; it invites me to ask “not what goes on ‘inside’ people, but what people go on inside of.”⁸ For pragmatic reasons I tend to utilize David Tracy’s mutual critical (or revised) correlational method,⁹ and in the dialectic between understanding human experience and responding to it, I privilege liberationist theologies and religio-ethical norms of justice, love, and wisdom. My practice as a spiritual director and pastoral counselor seeks to promote practices of freedom for all people.¹⁰

As a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) I am accountable to the Reformed tradition of Christian theology. My formal theological education occurred in the ecumenical context of a divinity school affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and at a diocesan seminary affiliated with the contemplative Anglican tradition. My informal training in Buddhist philosophy and practice occurred in the Theravada traditions of Southeast Asia, primarily through five years of participation in an immigrant congregation and weekly study with Thich Phap Nhan, a Vietnamese monk whose training as a novice had been in the Mahayana tradition. My pastoral experience and Christian practice are informed by a contemplative epistemology developed through *vipassana* practice.

DANCING WITH DEATH: PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE OF TWO RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Pastoral theologians almost always begin their work by reflecting on a particular, concrete human experience. So I want to tell two stories in which ministry dances with death (after all, as the *Visudimaggā* tells us, the contemplation of dying and the encouragement of friendliness are the only two paths of contemplation that are consistently and in every way beneficial¹¹). I chose these stories for a particular reason: death and grief have a way of teaching us how interconnected we are; as queer theorist Judith Butler has written, “grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own.”¹² Two deaths in particular taught me about the social and contextual nature of my Buddhist-Christian identity, the ways in which my religious selves are caught up in lives not my own.¹³

Years ago, when I was a chaplain at a large public hospital, I was called to the bedside of the aged, dying patriarch of an Asian refugee family. I arrived with my pastoral identity on my sleeve—a bible in my hand, a pectoral cross around my neck, and a firm conviction that “incarnational ministry” would allow me to escort this patient and his family into the territory of death. There was just one catch: the family had no idea how to receive me and did not engage the contextual cues I offered. Primarily, we smiled at one another in awkward silence, ignoring the failing body in the bed, until—finally—a significantly acculturated son arrived. After speaking with his mother and siblings, he said to me, “We are grateful that you came to visit our father, but we do not need a Christian pastor here. My father is Buddhist.”

Without speaking I placed my hands palm-to-palm in front of my chest, and began to chant in Pali: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasam*. The climate in the room changed instantly. Family members assumed postures of worship; each child in turn approached the father and blessed him; the wife blessed each of the children, offered a long prayer in Vietnamese, and invited me to pray in English. What had been an occasion of grief and confusion became an opportunity—through social practices—to make merit for their dying husband and father. *Sangham jivitam yava nibbanam saranam gacchami*—to life’s end, until I reach *nibbana*, my refuge is the *sangha*.

In that hospital room, I seemed to arrive as a Christian pastor, an artifact of denominational formation processes and daily encounters with patients who were fundamentalist and evangelical Christians. I departed as a Buddhist deacon, an identity internalized through my devotional and congregational lives—themselves the products and coordination of social artifacts created centuries before my birth—and then performed before, evoked by, and accepted by a sympathetic audience for whom the identity carried great meaning and some comfort.

More recently, late at night, I visited a friend who was dying in a local hospital. He was unconscious, but I wanted to sit quietly with him and practice *metta bhavana*. When I pushed open the door to the hospital room, however, I knew immediately that I had intruded into the circle of chosen family, the people who had surrounded and supported him in daily life as brothers and friends, now supporting him in the process of dying. I made the immediate judgment that I should not stay long. I would simply stand far from the bed, send one ripple of loving-kindness around the room, and take my leave. Focusing on my breath, I turned my eyes in turn to each man in the room, watching him watch his dying friend, while I silently prayed: *May you be at peace; may you be free of suffering; may you be well and happy*. No one seemed to notice what I was doing.

But when I turned to the man beside me, he took my arm, leaned in close and whispered: “Promise you won’t leave without having a word of prayer with us.” I’m still not certain how it happened, but without announcement we joined hands around the bed and moved into Christian worship. We read scripture, sang hymns, laid hands on our friend, anointed his head, and released him to God. Each man spoke a tender farewell and blessing, witnessed by the others. Our friend died the next morning.

In that hospital room, I had not overtly identified myself as pastor; in fact, I had

entered with a determination to engage in a Buddhist spiritual discipline. But I was invited to perform a different identity, one that emerged between one man's lips, teeth and tongue and another man's ear and came into being through the community's acceptance of that identity as it was being performed. "O blest communion, fellowship divine! . . . All are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia, Alleluia!"¹⁴

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF IDENTITY AND FAITH

The acts of ministry in these stories invited the performance of different facets of my religious selves. One way to understand what occurred might be to say that the primary faith identity of those nearest to me in the web of being in those moments became reflected more prominently in my shifting and transitory practices of the religious self. This does not mean that "I" was a beautiful but static jewel simply reflecting whatever identities drew near, but that the relationships that constituted (or fashioned) my religious identities in those encounters allowed new possibilities to become manifest between myself and the families whose loved ones were dying. A son saying, "My father is Buddhist," or a grieving friend whispering, "Promise you won't leave," created space for something new to emerge, something that perhaps none of the participants intended or anticipated.

These statements by people with whom I intended to be in caring relationships became invitations to practice the religious self differently. They emerged in a "zone of intrinsic uncertainty,"¹⁵ creating, through joint action,¹⁶ knowledge of the self and of its relationships that was neither objective nor subjective but located "in between" the people in the hospital rooms. We as participants then internalized and performed those emergent possibilities through our relating to one another; possibilities latent in our interactions became social artifacts—tools for negotiating new ways of relating to one another—as our knowledges and practices of self, other, grieving, and dying were constructed, shared, and correlated through verbal and nonverbal discourse.

This process neither emptied nor relativized our religious identities, but reconstituted them in particular patterns of meaning and relationship as demanded by the pragmatics of the moment. Self-knowledge and religious identity became synonymous with facility in particular forms of discourse—what psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen calls "a 'knowing how' rather than a 'knowing that.'"¹⁷

From this perspective, religious faith and identity are interactive and performative phenomena; they are processes that occur through relationships and communities rather than entities that emerge from "within" people;¹⁸ they are social experiences rather than cognitive, affective, or spiritual properties of an individual. Positioning faith and religious identity as communal or relational resources¹⁹ suggests that religious and spiritual experiences, those times when we are aware of the presence of the numinous in our lives, in the world, and in our identities, are "relationally realized"²⁰—that is, created, reified, made concrete in new ways—when shared with one another.

IDENTITY, SOCIAL ARTIFACTS, AND THE TWO REALITIES IN
BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

This understanding of religious identity might not trouble a Buddhist; in many ways, it offers a contemporary and secular—if somewhat limited—rearticulation of the doctrine of interdependent arising (*pattica samupada*). This doctrine, in the words of Alice Keefe, interprets reality as a “web of mutual causality in which everything ultimately touches and conditions everything else, with nothing at all existing autonomously and nothing at all standing aloof from change.”²¹ The image of Indra’s Net provides a visual illustration of this doctrine: a web of mirror-like jewels, each reflecting in multiple facets the image of the whole web.²² Thus, the relational, responsive, and kaleidoscopic nature of the self as it manifests in the world is a fundamental Buddhist affirmation.

But for some (and perhaps many) Christians, the normative anthropology of rhetorical-responsive social constructionism can be problematic.²³ This is true for at least two reasons. First, social constructionism challenges Cartesian rationalism and the modernist tradition of the bounded, autonomous, and atomistic self; both concepts are hallmarks of Western religion and philosophy, and both are often conflated pre-critically with essential elements of Christianity itself. Second, social constructionism does not acknowledge the ontological and unchanging status of Christian identity established at baptism and nourished through the Eucharist. As an epistemological rather than ontological meta-theory, social constructionism might describe this understanding of Christian identity as a discursive communal norm, not an independent and essential aspect of being. While constructionists recognize the real effects of discourse and performative action in the material world, they are unlikely to concede that a discursive norm or performance such as baptism, receiving the Eucharist, or the vows of taking refuge in the Buddhist tradition grants any independent or essential status to participants.

Despite these two significant barriers, however, there is much in the Christian traditions that might confirm or complement the concepts and norms of social constructionism, as well as social constructionist understandings of religious identity. I think, for example, of dynamic *perichoresis* and social understandings of the Trinity, with their emphasis on the mutual emptying of relationships at the heart of the divine;²⁴ of the *kenotic* self-emptying of the Christ, which collapsed hierarchies and allowed one life to be poured out for, into, and continued by many, which we see and experience today through the social processes that comprise the church;²⁵ of the communal *anamnesis* of the sacraments, in which the past is placed into the present²⁶ and calls us to shed our narrow personal identities to identify with the body of Christ “sustaining all sentient beings.”²⁷ Indeed, as David Chappell has noted, the religious identities “of being Buddhist or Christian emerged as social movements,”²⁸ and both traditions understand truth to be expressed through social relations and artifacts.

Does this mean, then, that when we acknowledge our religious identities as social artifacts, we are reducing them to nothing but manifestations of social processes, tem-

porary expressions of the contingent social dimensions of the world? No—I do not think that is the case. But in order to demonstrate why, we must shift our inquiry from the anthropological to the ontological. While it is true that constructionists might engage in a positivist social reductionism, neither Buddhism nor Christianity allows us to limit our religious identities to the observable contours or processes of social interchange that manifest as dimensions of the human in time and space. Rather, social constructionist accounts of religious identity and belief are rendered incomplete by both the Madhyamaka theme of two truths (ultimate and conventional) and the Christian conception of ultimate reality as the Trinitarian life of a kenotic God.

The Madhyamaka theme of two truths, as described by John P. Keenan,²⁹ acknowledges an ultimate (or divine) realm that exists simultaneously with the realm of worldly convention. This is not a dualistic concept; the two worlds interpenetrate, coexist, and intermingle whether or not humans are aware of them. The two realms can be differentiated, but not separated; both are present at once, and the interdependent arising of the conventional world—which includes our conversations, social interchanges, and religious identities—is conditioned by and manifests from this ultimate dimension. Jesus is divine but dependently arisen within history;³⁰ the “dharma is ultimate and beyond our complete knowing, but it is also accessible through the Buddha and Sangha.”³¹ The Buddha and sangha are social manifestations of the dharma, the ultimate wearing the face of the conventional. In a similar manner, *the social artifacts that in the conventional world are our religious identities may also express ultimate reality.*

From a Christian perspective, ultimate reality is seen most clearly in the dynamic outpouring and emptying of the persons of the Trinity. Karl Baier suggests that God, Christ, and Spirit participate in a flow of eternal energy that circulates playfully among them, “Ultimate Reality . . . distributing itself . . . among several actors who give it, receive it, and pass it on to one another in a kenotic . . . process . . . as a circle of selfless self-communication.”³² It is not difficult to extend this vision to imagine the eternal energy of the Trinity also circulating playfully between the two dimensions of reality, creating and sustaining the mundane world in which we live and move but that can perhaps prevent us from seeing the ultimate reality in which we have our being.

Thus, for Christians, ultimate reality is always present, yet always becoming manifest through the Body of Christ and its expressions and manifestations that occur through social processes in the material world. From my perspective, *ultimate reality in both its Christian and Buddhist expressions is primarily experienced through social processes and artifacts: the church, the sangha, the sutras, the bible, the Christ, the Buddha, and the religious identities that emerge from each individual’s socially embedded “subjectivity.”*

SUBJECTIVITY, AGENCY, AND INTUITION IN THE PRACTICE OF THE RELIGIOUS SELF

In response to an early draft of this essay, Sallie King, a scholar of engaged Buddhism, suggested that my account of religious identity as a social artifact overlooks the many

choices that an individual makes in the process of constructing a religious identity.³³ This could imply that my approach to religious identity formation fails to account adequately for the role of individual agency and subjectivity in shaping our religious selves. I would suggest that the norms and criteria that inform an individual's choices and agency, and that shape that person's subjectivity, are generated through social processes and then interiorized as personal resources; this can occur in a way that allows them to be experienced as subjective properties rather than social artifacts. Nonetheless, King's critique raises an interesting question: Just how does a person decide, precisely, which social artifacts to privilege and isolate from the flow of social process and to interiorize as personal resources?

I can imagine several "constructionist" responses to that question; the most radical might simply dismiss the question itself as a relic of modernist understandings of the self as independent, autonomous, and enduring. Nonetheless, I think King has accurately identified a (perhaps subjugated and certainly tense) "blend and balance of the individual and the social" within Buddhism.³⁴ The relationship of human subjectivity and agency to social process and interdependent arising has not been adequately resolved by Buddhism, Christianity, or social constructionist psychology, and I will not attempt to resolve it here. But in light of the stories above, which illustrate how my religious selves evolved through social processes in two particular instances, it is worth reflecting on subjectivity and agency in relation to the "crucial moment" in each hospital room when the tension between different religious traditions "gave way or reversed and became an opening, an opportunity" for compassionate service.³⁵

In each case, I carried a pastoral intention into the room: to reduce suffering through acts of care. This intention certainly belonged to "me," but it was also an artifact of, and a response to, the processes of religious and spiritual formation that generate and sustain my pastoral identity through social artifacts and interactions. When the grieving son said, "We do not need a Christian pastor here; my father is Buddhist," I did not make a conscious decision to "become," or practice being, a Buddhist. Likewise, when a grieving friend said, "Promise you won't leave without having a word of prayer with us," I did not make a decision to set aside *metta bhavana* in order to "become," or practice being, a Christian. Both shifts occurred through the *wu wei* of right effort, in obedience to what was asked of me by the moment.

In each moment, my choice was to obey an impulse, a call and invitation, to reduce suffering by emptying myself, in one case, of my Christian identity and in the other by releasing attachment to my Buddhist identity. It was the same choice in each situation, but I did not experience it as a moment of decision; I simply submitted to the occasion. It is true that in obeying I privileged a preexisting, personal commitment to maintaining a pastoral identity that is flexible enough to adjust to the subjective needs of those I encounter in ministry. (The alternative would have been to colonize the other by imposing my "objective" understanding of what they needed or what I assumed they would experience as "positive" care.) Responding as I did to these two grieving families also honored the Buddhist norm of *upaya* by finding a way to offer spiritual care in ways that skillfully accommodated the religious commitments of the people I sought to comfort.

But my adoption of skillful means and my desire to hold my pastoral identity lightly are not solely subjective choices. They are also manifestations of previous social processes that created the social artifacts that allow me to practice and perform my preferred pastoral self. I did not experience this as a choice, but as an intuitive knowing of what was expected of me and how that expectation might be fulfilled. This intuitive wisdom is similar to Aristotelian *phronesis*. Elsewhere, I have described the experience as a suspension of linear, logical, and rational thinking in order to privilege

a “heart” knowledge . . . founded both in a surrender to the reality experienced by others and in a lived awareness of the presence of God. This intuitive knowledge of the heart (in which the heart is understood as an organ that perceives divine realities) dictates who and how the [spiritual] director needs to be in relation to the directee and what sort of spiritual guidance is necessary in a given situation. To approach life in this way might be one way of “having the same mind” as Christ.³⁶

On reflection, I wonder if my “choice” in the two hospital rooms was not a “choosing” at all, but an experience of what my Buddhist teacher often promised—that if I persisted diligently in meditation, I would reach a point where I would simply know, without struggling, what to do in any situation.

“CLOTHED IN NOTHINGNESS”: ULTIMATE REALITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

In the hospital rooms of those two dying men, my religious identities were created and sustained through performative relationships with others who were primarily strangers to me. They emerged in response to social invitations: “My father is Buddhist” and “Promise you won’t leave without having a word of prayer.” Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that those social invitations (which led to social performances) were a way in which ultimate reality, in both the Buddhist and Christian understandings, broke through into the conventional world, piercing the veil between dimensions to offer consolation to suffering beings—an instance of the finite bearing the infinite, “clothed in nothingness” yet manifesting significant power?³⁷

Yet this interpretive shift from epistemology to ontology represents a limit of social constructionist psychology. It fails to place joint action, performativity, and *multiphrenia* into a context that recognizes the manifestations of the ultimate within the conventional. In one realm, religious identities are mere artifacts of social interaction; from the perspective of the other realm, performative practices such as baptism, taking refuge, receiving Eucharist, and practicing mindfulness reveal our ultimate identities as they emerge through kenotic *perichoresis* and the shifting of the jewels on Indra’s Net. Our practices of our religious selves in the mundane, conventional realities of social processes can simultaneously express ultimate realities that might only be accessed through the artifacts of our relating to one another.

NOTES

1. Alice A. Keefe, "Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997): 61–76.
2. See Karl Baier, "Ultimate Reality in Buddhism and Christianity: A Christian Perspective," in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Keudel (Norwich, Norfolk, Great Britain: SCM Press, 2005), 109; and John P. Keenan, "A Mahayana Theology of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004): 89–100.
3. Keefe, "Visions," 69.
4. John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). For Shotter, "knowledge of the third kind" is a sort of "group wisdom" lodged (and always operating) in the hurly-burly background of everyday life; it does not belong to individuals and is not collected or categorized as objective knowledge. In some ways, it is similar to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, that has had much currency in pastoral and practical theologies during the past twenty-five years.
5. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
6. David W. Chappell, drawing on the work of Wilfred Smith, has suggested that practice, rather than belief, provides a significant "means of marking religious identity." See David W. Chappell, "Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 25 (2005): 10.
7. Francis V. Tiso, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2006.
8. John Shotter, *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 106.
9. David Tracy, "The Foundations of Practical Theology," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 61–82.
10. After Kant and Foucault.
11. The *Visudimaggā* is a fifth-century manual of meditation that outlines forty possible contemplative paths. Dean Rolston, "Memento Mori: Notes on Buddhism and AIDS," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 1, no. 1 (1991): 24.
12. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.
13. Chappell, "Religious Identity," 14.
14. From William W. How, "For All the Saints," in *Hymns for Saint's Days, and Other Hymns*, ed. Earl Nelson (1864).
15. John Shotter, "What Is a 'Personal' Relationship? A Rhetorical-Responsive Account of 'Unfinished Business,'" in *Attributions, Accounts, and Close Relationships*, ed. John H. Harvey, Terri L. Orbuch, and Ann L. Weber (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992), 21.
16. See John Shotter, *Social Accountability*.
17. Kenneth J. Gergen, "Warranting Voice and the Elaboration of the Self," in *Texts of Identity*, ed. John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen, Inquiries in Social Construction Series, ed. Kenneth J. Gergen and John Shotter (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 75.
18. James M. Day, "Speaking of Belief: Language, Performance, and Narrative in the Psychology of Religion," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 3 (1993): 213–229.
19. Kenneth J. Gergen, "Belief as a Relational Resource," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 3 (1993): 231–235.
20. Kenneth J. Gergen, "Reflecting on/with My Companions," in *Social Constructionism and Theology*, ed. C. A. M. Hermans, G. Immink, A. DeJong, and J. van der Lans. Empirical Studies in Theology series, vol. 7, ed. J. A. Van der Ven (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2002), 286.

21. Keefe, "Visions," 63.
22. For more about this image from the Avatamsaka school of Buddhism, see D. L. Barnhill, "Indra's Net as Food Chain: Gary Snyder's Ecological Vision," *Ten Directions* 11, no. 1 (1990): 20.
23. See, for example, Mark I. Wallace, "Losing the Self, Finding the Self: Postmodern Theology and Social Constructionism," in Hermans et al., *Social Constructionism*, 93–111. Wallace wants to embrace social constructionist ideas but is ultimately unwilling to surrender the idea that the self must have an essential core.
24. Donald W. Mitchell, "Re-creating Christian Community: A Response to Rita M. Gross." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003): 21–32.
25. See Keenan, "Real Presence," 89–100.
26. See Jay T. Rock, "The Ongoing Creation of Loving Community: Christian Ritual and Ethics." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000): 90–92.
27. Keenan, "Real Presence," 95.
28. Chappell, "Religious Identity," 14.
29. See John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), and *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
30. Keenan, "Real Presence," 97.
31. Chappell, "Religious Identity," 12.
32. Baier, "Ultimate Reality," 100.
33. Sallie B. King, "Response to Kunz, Reeves, and Bidwell," presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, November 17, 2006, Washington, DC, 8.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Tiso, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2006.
36. Duane R. Bidwell, *Short-Term Spiritual Guidance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 24.
37. I take this evocative phrase from the work of pastoral theologian Leonard M. Hummel, who has demonstrated through qualitative research that what I am suggesting here is precisely how consolation occurs in the lived experience of American Lutherans, allowing the passing, material world to disclose or reveal the eternal but immaterial God. See Leonard M. Hummel, *Clothed in Nothingness: Consolation for Suffering* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).