**PRESENCE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY:**

**LIVING WITH RESONANCE IN THE SECULAR AGE**

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My doctoral dissertation Presence-Centered Spirituality: Living With Resonance in the Secular Age attempts to articulate a presence-centered Christian spirituality within the current cultural reality of North America. Although the scope of the dissertation focuses on the context of a broader community of Christian practice (church or ministry organization) it emerges from my lifelong youth ministry experience. This paper submitted for the Association of Youth Ministry Educators, October 2024 Conference in Chicago, Illinois is a big picture summary of key themes in the dissertation.

**Abstract**

North American churches’ struggle with contemporary culture seems to coincide with evidence offered in Charles Taylor’s evaluation of the *Secular Age* and expressed through the theological analysis of Andy Root and James K. A. Smith. Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa’s concept of the acceleration of time provides understanding of why ministry leaders and pastors’ lives are stress-filled, with little margin to even nurture their own soul and life with God. Ministry in North American churches appears hurried and formulaic with imagination for Christian formation sorely lacking. As congregations hope to re-imagine ministry in the secular age, how might they locate, and articulate, Christian practices that resonate within a world where mystery and enchantment appears absent in what Charles Taylor describes as “the immanent frame?”

Presence-centered spirituality proposes an embodied, robust, spirituality to live and make meaning within our current Secular Age. The approach informs and shapes Christian formation and ministry, cultivates communities of practice, and guides a way of living the good life that Jesus Christ offers. Presence-centered spirituality seeks to move beyond the cognitive realm to experience and encounter God.

Interaction with Charles Taylor’s philosophical theory of modernity, Hartmut Rosa’s sociological theory of Resonance, T. H. Lurhman’s anthropological research on religion and practice, Andy Root’s *Christopraxis* theological framework, along with a host of other scholars deepens a presence-centered approach to life, spirituality, and ministry to move forward toward freedom from modernity’s dominance on Christianity in the Western World. Intentional presence-centered rhythms of life enable ministry leaders to be spiritually formed for the sake of others as they nurture communities of Christian practice as artists, curators, and storytellers. A rhythm of life focused on prayer, solitude, contemplation, scripture engagement, community, ministry, theological reflection, justice, stability, proximity, *Kairos* time, mindfulness, and other embodied spiritual practices are essential to living presence-centered and faithful in the way of Jesus Christ with resonance in the Secular Age.

**Presence-centered Spirituality**

Presence-centered spirituality does not describe some new, innovative, theological, or spiritual construct. Presence-centered life and ministry has occurred in all cultures and in all times when Christianity has been lived out passionately and faithfully. But what does Presence-centered spirituality look like in response to our current cultural context?

Charles Taylor’s cumulative dynamics of his secularization theory has set forth what he calls the Secular Age in current Western civilization. In Taylor’s seminal work, *A Secular Age,* he describes how and why society moved from an enchanted world in the year 1500 (when the social imaginary of the West remained pregnant with transcendence and almost universal acceptance of the reality of God) to 500 years later when society finds itself firmly entrenched in an immanent frame. Taylor declares that secularization is not a subtraction story but the actual change of the nature of religion, faith, belief… and a diversification of religion that has fragilized both faith and disbelief. He declares the Reformation and counter-reformation, fueled by rationalism, created the dynamic of the excarnation of Christianity and facilitated the transition of Christianity to a disembodied religion residing primarily in the cognitive domain. Taylor specifically points to reformer John Calvin and the work of those who embraced, followed, and modified his theological framework as one of the biggest factors in hastening the disenchantment of the world and domestication of Christianity.

In this immanent frame that Charles Taylor describes, faith appears extremely fragilized, and the social imaginary is defined as hyper-skeptical about the existence of a God—especially a God people actually encounter. However, Taylor asserts human beings, even in the immanent frame, still long for experiences of transcendence. He doesn’t really explore the why of that longing for transcendence or provide a detailed description of what transcendence actually is. These transcendent moments can be triggered by an experience, perhaps the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, an intense conversation with a friend or stranger, an encounter with the beauty of nature, the arts, a film or concert, or even a visit to a museum. In this way, their unbelief is fragilized and they are newly open to mystery and something beyond rationalism and exclusive humanism. Taylor makes a helpful contribution to those of us in ministry engaging with young people and their attempts to make sense of transcendent experiences through the concepts of reacting to these supposed transcendent encounters either through “Open Takes” or “Closed Spins.”

The importance of a turn to the theological is another important foundation for a Presence-centered spirituality in the Secular Age. Andy Root is the theologian and dialogue partner that has shaped much of my theological ideas. Root believes much of academic inspired practical theology focuses almost entirely on human action to the neglect of divine action. He has sought to distinguish himself and his work in seeking to develop a practical theological framework that pursues the intersection of human and divine action. For me this intersection is at the core of presence-centered spirituality, ministry and is focused on the event of God’s revelation. Doing practical theology is an impossibility unless we actively engage in ministry. And theological reflection is essential for ministry that seeks the intersection of divine and human action. A key for Presence-centered ministry is God as minister and our participation with God’s own being by being ministers to others. We encounter God’s very being as becoming. Jesus Christ is the ultimate minister who comes to human beings in their impossibilities (death) to bring possibility (resurrection).

Engaging in ministry as a practical theologian requires that we seek discernment to understand the dynamic complexities that may be involved in a person’s life and how they might encounter God’s action in those realities. God comes to us as minister, which proves essential in moving from an understanding of ministry as “the subject” to a focus on God as the heart and subject of ministry. Often, especially in ministries and churches embracing a pragmatic approach to ministry, “God is objectified,” and the justification for ministry and/or program efforts is reduced to “do they work” which means do they grow numbers of participants. The theological turn I propose requires a move from a primary focus on human action to divine action. A robust theology of the cross is critical for Presence-centered spirituality and ministry calling us to enter into presence-sharing with those who are suffering, to be with them in their pain and personhood.

One of my best discoveries of the last several years in my thinking about Presence-centered spirituality has been German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, especially his book *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*. His concepts of Acceleration, Alienation, Authenticity, Dynamic Stabilization, etc. are critical for understanding the exhausting dynamics of our modern culture, but his theory of Resonance is profound for thinking about what it means to be present to the present with ourselves, others, God and God’s creation. Rosa’s theory of resonance building on Taylor’s assertion that, even in the immanent frame of the secular age governed by a social imaginary of expressive individualism and exclusive humanism, there is still the potential for an occasion of transcendence. Rosa’s theory of resonance explores this occasion of transcendence.

For Rosa, resonance is not just an emotion or feeling. Rosa uses the metaphor of Tuning Forks to describe resonance. Rosa explains resonance as a “mode of relationship.” The theory of resonance involves “the interaction of affect (from the Latin—to do to) and emotion (Latin—to move out from) which together form a bidirectional vibration. Resonance happens when something impacts us, moves us, inspires us. We are affected by someone or something outside of ourselves. We respond with emotion, with feeling. Therefore, we are not only open to a reactive encounter, but we embrace a posture of openness to interact and encounter the other (person, object, place, or thing). For Rosa, this happens on a horizontal, vertical or diagonal axis.

Rosa’s concept of Diagonal resonance involves relationships to events and things. Modern humans primarily view the world as an unanimated resource to access and consume. Most people give little thought to how they relate to objects in the world around them. Rosa writes, “It is a specific characteristic of Western modernity that in its cognitive organization of its relationships to the world, it ascribes no resonant qualities to things, i.e., to non-human or at least non-animal objects.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Rosa continues, “The rational or cognitive universe of modernity, established and legitimized by science, is thus a ‘mute universe’ in which no other voices but those of human beings can be heard.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This was not the case in the pre-modern world where things, creatures, and objects had the potential of speaking in a variety of ways in an enchanted world. Through rationalism and the excarnation of the Protestant Enlightenment project, human beings interact with things and objects almost exclusively on an instrumental level. Things, objects, and the entire universe are viewed as essentially “mute.” Only human voices are relevant. In the premodern, enchanted world, animals, nature, etc. had character, essence, spirit, and could be a source of resonant relationship with human beings. St. Francis is an example of experiencing resonance with Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and the wolf of Gubbio. The scripture of a Balaam’s donkey speaking to him in Numbers 22.

Treating the world and things in the world as merely something to be consumed, to be exploited, will ultimately result in the same posture and attitude toward God. In Rosa’s theory, he explicitly places the promise of religion for resonance in the vertical axis. The promise of religion is that there is something beyond our immediate perception, something that is responsive and offers love and meaning to overcome alienation in all its forms.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Taylor’s contention that the devotion to God for its own sake has been lost in the Secular Age is a reality presence-centered spirituality and Rosa’s theory of resonance addresses. Taylor declares, from a Christian perspective, the missing centerpiece is “the love of God” which could give us “an alternative way of describing Wesley’s rebellion against the established piety of his day.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The current trajectory of the evangelical church toward an emphasis on selective morality (anti-gay, abortion elimination, etc.) is an example of Taylor’s critique. A sense of devotion to God and God’s kingdom set aside for pseudo-Christian political ideology (capitalism, partisan politics, militarism, nationalism, anti-immigration, gender politics, racism, etc.) is diminishing a clear picture of what it means to be Christian in the world. At a time when faith is already fragilized and no longer an attractive alternative for emerging generations, this adds to the growing cynicism directed at Christianity. Likewise, Root adds to this assessment with his critique of evangelical pragmaticism focused on programs and metrics of success (based on numbers) and not centered on devotion to God as the subject of ministry. Presence-centered spirituality focuses on practices and awareness that help us tune the strings of a person’s life for resonant participation, collaboration, and accompaniment in the divine life of God.

Curating an environment that leads to presence-centeredness (resonance) occurs through being embedded in a community of Christian practice. The more the community of Christian practice leans into a common life around values, beliefs, and action, the more likely these shared experiences can result in resonant encounters. In this dimension of the horizontal axes of resonance, human beings must learn what it means to be in I-Thou relationships. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s I-Thou philosophical work, centered on relational encounter, is important for the concept of resonant relationships. This must first be learned at the horizontal level of human relationships as we see the other—not as an “it” but as a sacred “thou” and how that changes the nature of our relationships. The human beings moving from I-I to I-It to I-Thou is the progression to becoming fully human, relationally resonant beings.

My work also draws on Tanya Luhrmann’s research and findings on religious practice and belief from the field of anthropology. In Luhrmann’s book, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, she sets out to examine why faith endures. She declares, “people only doubt that spirits are real in modern, secular, individualist societies.”[[5]](#footnote-5) From Luhrmann’s research, she suggests that those who have religious beliefs behave as if “they have a faith frame as well as an ordinary set of expectations about an everyday world.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Faith frame, is defined by Luhrmann as “a sustained, intentional, deliberative commitment to the idea that there are invisible beings who are involved in human lives in helpful ways.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Luhrmann devotes a whole chapter in *How God Becomes Real* to training and talent, declaring, “Many people assume that training and talent are important in many areas of life: ballet, violin playing, tennis. It seems more awkward to talk about talent and training when it comes to knowing gods and spirits because doing so seems to suggest that the human, not the god, gives rise to the events.”[[8]](#footnote-8) She disagrees with the thought that human talent and training diminishes God. The faith community, according to Luhrmann, can share talent and engage in training together to strengthen the bond between each other and with God. I believe that developing a presence-centered rhythm of life filled with embodied practices and mindfulness can open human beings and communities to be more receptive to God and more effectual in living out their faith.

Luhrmann states, “What rituals (practices, prayer, liturgy, etc.) do is to remind people that gods and spirits matter.”[[9]](#footnote-9) She acknowledges that her research shows a human aptitude for “absorption—absorption is a capacity to be immersed in the world of the senses, inner and outer—and those who have a talent for it and train to develop it are more likely to experience invisible others as present… more likely to report sharper mental images and more unusual spiritual experiences. They are more likely to say that they experience a god as being present.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

While embedding in and studying Christian communities, she observed, “The Christians sometimes said that after they began to pray actively, they not only experienced God more vividly, but their inner world became sharper and felt more real… They knew that practice mattered.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Luhrmann uses the Tellegen Absorption Scale to measures the inclination people have for absorption. She argues that the more you become absorbed in something (religion, mysticism, prayer, meditation, etc.) the more it becomes real to you. “The Absorption Scale seems to pick up the enjoyable dimension—imaginative involvement, the delight we take in letting a story or sensation carry us away.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Is resonance at play here? Resonance is not just an emotion but a mode of relation. And while resonance cannot be manipulated with a formula or summoned at will,[[13]](#footnote-13) being presence-centered, or practicing the presence of God shapes and forms the follower of Jesus to be attuned to God’s presence and God’s divine action.

Luhrmann provides data from experiments conducted among Christian congregations measuring the difference in those who engaged in spiritual practices featuring “inner sense cultivation” and those who were given lectures on the Gospels. She reports, “We found that those who had done the inner sense cultivation practice had scores on the subjective measures of mental imagery vividness that were significantly higher… than those who had listened to the lectures.”[[14]](#footnote-14) These inner sense cultivation practices create not just emotions that make people feel something, more importantly, they actually create a mode of relation with God.

Similar to Taylor’s open take within the immanent frame, Rosa’s resonance framework of af<fect followed by a response of e>motion, and Root’s critical realism to describe a God who comes as event to reveal Godself, Luhrmann states that gods cannot be known to be present in an abstract manner; they must be felt to be present, responsive, and engaged. She cites Taylor’s concept of the buffered self when declaring that “European Americans are invited by their cultural heritage to imagine the mind as a private place, walled off from the world, a citadel in which thoughts are one’s own and no one else has access to them.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Luhrmann contrasts North American evangelicals with evangelicals she studied from Ghana. “Ghanaians imagine the mind as less private, less bounded, and more supernaturally potent than Americans do. Most Ghanaian words for thought and emotion are rooted in bodily experience.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The mind-body dualism of the Western world has led to the fragilization of faith that Taylor describes as a by-product of the buffered self.

Luhrmann also emphasizes the importance of testimony and storytelling for faith formation. She argues that it is the way people tell stories and how they practice engagement with those stories that are critical for making gods and spirits become intimately real to them. Luhrmann writes about the concept of “Spiritual Kindling.” Like Rosa, Luhrmann’s work builds a strong case for the importance of embodied spiritual practices. She defines spiritual kindling as small, intentional “acts of attention” which shapes a person’s unique experience of the gods and spirits.

Presence-centered spirituality embraces an intentional, ritualized, practiced sense of awareness and mindfulness which are essential components for the encounter of God who is mostly hidden from us. Luhrmann’s research in *How God Becomes Real*, asserts religious practices are more important for living as if God were real than religious belief.

My theological framework emphasizes the importance of developing a holistic spiritual rhythm of life with prayer as a foundational aspect of presence-centered spirituality. Living a presence-centered spirituality is infused with a tangible practice of the presence of God and a heart saturated by devotion to God and thoughts of God. Presence-centered spirituality attunes a person’s life to live in such a way that they journey with the Spirit of Christ in every moment and experience along the way. Presence-centered spirituality embraces the transcendent and immanent reality that in Christ we live and move and have our being. Still, presence-centered spirituality does not serve merely as a pragmatic formula in which our actions and devotion ensure profound experiences and encounters of God in our lives. The posture of presence-centered spirituality is for a person’s being to be intentionally present to the present. To be centered in presence requires practices that enable persons to eliminate the distractions that short circuit becoming fully alive human beings living the good life.

The practice of presence-centered spirituality, either through living with a defined rhythm of life, robust life in community, or embracing the art of ministry with and for others all relies on a posture of openness to God’s mystery and ministry, while engaging a “scaffolding” or structure that guides our efforts based on God’s faithfulness and experiences from historic Christianity. These structures entail both acknowledging first a God that appears primarily hidden for people in the Secular Age and calling for practices and postures that present an openness to God, not the manipulation of God. These Christian practices, centered in a Christocentric vision of sitting at the feet of Jesus, invite people to both adopt a posture of seeing the very presence of God in everyday life and to imitate Christ through each person’s participation within God’s own divine being.

Christian practices, especially prayer, are central to presence-centered spiritualty. Practicing a presence-centered spirituality nurture eyes that become open to seeing a hidden God at work in the world, ears that hear the Holy Spirit speaking to us and hearts that join others in our community to discern our faithful participation in God’s action. Christian practices don’t ensure a tangible experience with God nor an experience of resonance with the divine or with God’s creation, but they put us in a stance of openness for the encounter with God.

Being presence-centered is a posture—one of openness that looks beyond the immanent frame toward possibilities of meaningful, sometimes transcendent encounters. This God, in Christ Jesus, moves us to become present to ourselves, to others, to God, and to all of God’s creation. This kind of living attuned to the presence of God is what Karl Rahner called, “The mysticism of ordinary life.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The very essence of presence-centered spirituality and rhythm of life leans into the embrace and pursuit of the “imitation of God” and the theological importance of divine participation in God. Paul instructs believers to “be imitators of God” in Ephesians 5:1, and Peter declares in II Peter 1 “Those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ… may become participants of the divine nature.”

Christian formation in presence-centered spirituality is personal, but it is not an individual endeavor. Spiritual formation is rooted in being a person with others and together living out what it means to be a community of Christian practice. With the dynamics of expressive individualism shaping the social imaginary of the Secular Age, it is critical to understand that our personhood is wrapped up in relationship; that our very being as persons is constituted by our relation to others. Living life together in community is the way God designed people to be most fully human in their being.

1. Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 60. See also Rosa, *Resonance,* 397; Rosa adds to this argument, “A violin generally becomes resonant only after many hours of lessons, and Latin poetry speaks only to those who have learned Latin.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid.,75. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Karl Rahner, *Mystics in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)