**THE APOPHATIC PREDICAMENT IN EMERGING ADULT FAITH FORMATION: TEACHING THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN HIGHLY DIGITIZED KATAPHATIC LEARNING CONTEXTS**

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**Abstract**

For years Christian institutions in the west have observably supported and maintained kataphatic approaches to faith formation. Respectively, many schools have neglected apophatic considerations when teaching principles and approaches within emerging adult faith formation. Layered into this predicament is the strong inclination of predominantly kataphatic learning contexts to use increasing digital forms of instruction. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating reliance on digital technology in college classrooms has only exacerbated this dilemma. As a result, apophatic attentions, which tend to move away from trending pedagogical approaches and subsequent outcomes, remain formidable.

The following paper employs a fourteen-year case review of students' spiritual type similarities and differences at a private Christian university in the United States. The review’s theoretical and phenomenological framework utilizes spiritual typologies associated with apophatic and kataphatic nomenclature found in the “Circle of Sensibility” and espoused by spiritual type theorists. The data supports the theory of a general dividing line between approaches to Christian spirituality between apophatic and kataphatic taxonomical constructs. Additionally, this paper looks at digital distraction in current academic, spiritual formation contexts as a stimulus to the lack of apophatic emphases. The author offers recommendations for incorporating complementary kataphatic and apophatic approaches in spiritual formation classes built on the findings.

**Keywords:**

Kataphatic – apophatic – mystery – pedagogy – digital – distraction – spiritual formation – faith formation – emerging adult

**1 Introduction**

“The reason God so often seems hidden and silent,” notes David Benner, “is precisely because we are looking in the wrong places.” [[1]](#endnote-1) The quest for personalized and individualized expressions of spirituality has limited the believer’s need to engage in atypical approaches to one’s relationship with God. For many followers of Jesus Christ, there is a tendency to restrict interaction with diverse representations of Christian spirituality. Typically, there is accommodation to only one or two paths, often born out of catechetical fidelity or specifically-directed ecclesiastical pedagogy. As Boa notes: “Even when we acknowledge that there are several legitimate and complementary approaches to growth in the spiritual life, there is a natural tendency to limit ourselves to the one that best fits our personality and to assume that if it works for us, it should work for others.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This article is particularly interested in how pedagogical approaches to faith formation within Christian higher education have potentially narrowed awareness of specific apophatic postures—encounter with the mystery of God—in emerging adult faith formation. This “predicament” has, as a result, produced a proclivity on the part of instructors to rely exclusively on kataphatic objectives—encounter with the revealed aspects of God’s nature—in spiritual formation learning contexts, further exacerbating this dilemma. As a result, three areas of concern are addressed.

First, a fourteen-year case review compares students' spiritual type similarities and differences at a private Christian university in the United States. This inquiry's theoretical and phenomenological framework utilizes spiritual typologies, situated in apophatic and kataphatic nomenclature associated with the “Circle of Sensibility,” espoused by spiritual type theorists.[[3]](#endnote-3) The data supports a base notion of a general dividing line between approaches to Christian spirituality. Linked to a similar study by the same author, “It is apparent from the data participants view their educational experience as one which endeavours to develop the whole person, in light of integral models of spiritual and academic formation. This is chiefly represented in the collection of spiritual types found within the participants’ self-reported data, when compared to the theological and doctrinal position of their academic institution.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The same conclusion is additionally maintained in this study.

Another way of expressing what is noted above observes that, while maintaining an intuitive understanding of the need for greater exposure to different forms and expressions of Christian spirituality as a path for continued growth and development, students feel essentially locked into established patterns and preferences of faith formation. In this case, further underscoring “…the influence catechetical models have on faith development during later adolescence.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Consequently, the desire for a deeper apophatic understanding of God is further complicated. Furthermore, this predicament is impeded by a subsequent potential obstacle, the backdrop of changing digital learning contexts.

Second, this paper looks at the current dilemma of digital distraction in college classrooms—applied here to spiritual formation classes in particular—as a stimulus to the lack of apophatic emphases in faith development. As Seemiller notes, “… when students use their devices, they are pulled away from the learning environment into a virtual world. This can result in distracted and disconnected learning in which students mentally enter and exit the course content.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions across the globe have been forced into increased development, employment, and implementation of digital technology for teaching university students. While in some cases, instructors before COVID-19 were moving toward enforcement of classroom technology policies and partial—if not all-out—digital device bans, their efforts were thwarted by the move to online asynchronous, online synchronous, and hybrid models of online instruction due to the pandemic. Instead of aiding students in limiting their overuse of digital engagement in the classroom, the reverse seems to have occurred.

As a result, the slower contemplative and unhurried postures for engaging the mystery and presence of the Holy Other in collaborative learning settings are circumvented. The “enter and exit” dynamic of digitally-oriented educational settings has over-stimulated students through a constant barrage of beeps, blips, pings, and bluescreens constantly emitting and reinforcing excessive amounts of dopamine and a heightened state of digital “buzz.” The result: students tend to be less open to and less familiar with apophatic encounters. In turn, the bifurcation between apophatic awareness and over-stimulated digitized kataphatic learning contexts results in a final concern. Namely, how can one encounter the mystery of God in highly digitized kataphatic classrooms?

Based on the considerations noted above, the author offers final recommendations for incorporating specific apophatic strategies into spiritual formation courses. As Setran and Kiesling note, “In a world of instant gratification and a desire for instant feedback, the *slow* and *patient cultivation* of the soul can seem both unnecessary and restraining.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, appropriating postures and approaches in grappling with the mystery of God remain imperative in the developing life of the emerging adult. “Likewise, emerging adults must be confronted with a compelling picture of God and his kingdom . . . To move in this direction, we must first seek to help emerging adults fall in love (or more deeply in love) with our beautiful God and his kingdom.”[[8]](#endnote-8) In aiding emerging adults to fall more deeply in love with their Creator, apophatic understanding and postures can be studied, discovered, and experienced within predominately kataphatic learning contexts, thereby reinforcing the mysterious transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of students. Recommendations balance between in-class and out-of-class awareness exercises and practical personal and corporately shared experiences. The goal: to reinforce and expose students to more balanced postures of kataphatic and apophatic Christian spirituality.

**2 A case in review**

**2.1 *The Circle of Sensibility as an underlying theoretical framework***

Spiritual type theorists for many years have promoted a variety of approaches to the assessment and evaluation of how individuals express their faith. For example, the recent emphasis on the Enneagram is one such theory finding great popularity both within academic research and professional and lay-driven ministry praxis settings, especially in the west.[[9]](#endnote-9) The “Circle of Sensibility,” most notably associated with Urban T. Holmes III, is another typological theory for understanding the Christian faith (see Figure 1). The Circle of Sensibility utilizes a phenomenological framework of Eastern and Western historical constructs of expressed Christian spirituality.[[10]](#endnote-10) This approach uses kataphatic, apophatic, mind, and heart delineations as a basis for understanding Christian faith preferences. Kataphatic spirituality describes the revealed God (Ps. 19; 119; Isa. 43:12; 44:8; Jhn. 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Col. 2:9; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12; 2 Pet. 1:20). “The kataphatic way makes use of words, symbols, and images to relate to and describe God. The kataphatic advocate uses images and symbols in speaking about one’s relationship and union with God.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Contrastingly, apophatic spirituality describes the mystery of God (Ex. 33:20; Deut. 29:29; 1 Kings 8:12; Job 36:26; 37:23; 38:4-7; 42:3; Ps. 139:6; 147:5; Prov. 25:2; Ecc. 3:11; Isa. 40:13, 25-26, 28; 55:8-11; John 1:18; Rom 11:33-34; 1 Cor. 2:16; 1 Tim. 6:16). “The apophatic seeks to understand and relate to God through silence, going beyond images and words to mystical union. The apophatic way is one of darkness, emptiness, and the negation of images.”[[12]](#endnote-12)



FIGURE 1 *The Circle of Sensibility*

The two other notable differentiation within the framework—mind, and heart—focus on thinking, intellectually-oriented, spiritually, and sensation, affective, components of spirituality, respectively. As a result, four spiritual types emerge within expressed preferences of Christian spirituality: kataphatic/mind (K/M – thinking-oriented), kataphatic/heart (K/H - feeling-oriented); apophatic/heart (A/H - being-oriented); and apophatic/mind (A/M - doing-oriented). Thus, the Circle of Sensibility offers spiritual type theorists a user-friendly model for assessing typological outcomes within a basic framework of faith formation.

The Circle of Sensibility also aids researchers and classroom instructors in quickly gauging student-expressed spirituality in the “context of communal experiences,” allowing both student and instructor to recognize “unique faith patterns and/or preferences.”[[13]](#endnote-13) This type of approach equally promotes determining where there might be overemphasis or excesses in one’s preferred expressions of spirituality. For example, if one conveys proclivities for kataphatic-mind postures, then correctives that align with the diagonally opposite apophatic-heart orientation are offered for equilibrium in one’s spiritual growth trajectory. Contrastingly, if one exhibits apophatic-mind preferences, then correctives to the diagonally opposite kataphatic-heart are offered, and so on. The end goal: to bring about a more balanced approach between the four major types in assessing and understanding one’s patterns and preferences of expressed spirituality, acknowledging similarities and differences within the body of Christ, and pursuing mutually beneficial outcomes both personally and corporately. As Hosmer notes: “The most important function of the typology lies in its power to point each one of us to the place of encounter with our opposite and call us to an interaction which is painful, risking, and costing, but supremely fruitful. Encounter with the other, with the opposite, is the place of love.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The following case review is offered as an example of the spiritual type differences among college students in a specific academic setting, along with demonstrated overemphasis to a preferred side of the scale.

**2.2 *Kataphatic particularity***

The participants in this case review were selected from a conservative evangelical liberal arts Christian university in the United States, from the state of Oregon. Corban University, founded in 1935, is:

A private Christian university with an 85-year history of educating students who will make a difference in the world for Jesus Christ. Situated on a beautiful forested hillside overlooking Oregon’s capital, Corban is only an hour from Portland, the Cascade Mountains, and the Oregon coast. … a private independent Christian university offering more than 50 undergraduate programs, as well as graduate programs in counseling, education, business, and ministry.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Additionally:

Throughout Corban’s history, there have been various church relationships, including the General Association of Regular Baptists. While we are now an independent Christian university, our Baptist roots run deep and inform our perspective on interpreting and applying Scripture. We are a Protestant and traditionally evangelical university, emphasizing the primacy of Scripture and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Corban, over the years, has brought to its campus students from traditional mainline Protestant denominations and independent evangelical churches across the United States. The school also has a broad population of international students from across the globe, connected most notably through the school’s Center for Global Engagement (CGE). The school requires all prospective students to avowedly profess faith in Jesus Christ as a basis for acceptance into the university. Thus, the review case appropriately represents a specific context for understanding spiritual type particularity.

Spiritual type data was collected through convenience samples for fourteen years in each spring semester from 2008 to 2021, with 497 participants involved in the review.[[17]](#endnote-17) All participants were enrolled in the same upper-division theology class—in the respective semester—from which the data was collected.[[18]](#endnote-18) Aggregate spiritual type scores for individual participants were determined by administering a spiritual type battery assessment[[19]](#endnote-19)—incorporating self-reporting techniques of a written narrative;[[20]](#endnote-20) a forced-choice preferred spirituality type inventory;[[21]](#endnote-21) and a spirituality type selector test.[[22]](#endnote-22) Spiritual type data was examined employing coding category analysis for the written narrative portion of the assessment (Part I) and verified self-scores on the forced-choice sections of the assessment (Part II and Part III). Participants received all three parts of the battery spiritual type assessment in an inclusive packet.

Descriptive statistics of adjusted spiritual type results are reported in Table 1 (N = 497, 252 females, 245 males). Adjusted spiritual type scores of K/M (kataphatic/mind) outcomes reflect 36.82% of the total sample (n = 183, 69 females, 114 males). Adjusted spiritual type scores of K/H (kataphatic/heart) outcomes reflect 50.50% of the total sample (n = 251, 149 females, 102 males). Adjusted spiritual type scores of A/H (apophatic/heart) outcomes reflect 6.04% of the total sample (n = 30, 15 females, 15 males). And, adjusted spiritual type scores of A/M (apophatic/mind) outcomes reflect 6.64% of the total sample (n = 33, 19 females, 14 males).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Spiritual Type | Frequency | Percentage | Total |
| K/MKataphatic/Mind | Females – 69Males – 114  | Females – 13.88%Males – 22.94% | 36.82% |
| K/HKataphatic/Heart | Females – 149Males – 102 | Females – 29.98%Males – 20.52% | 50.50% |
| A/HApophatic/Heart | Females – 15Males – 15 | Females – 03.02%Males – 03.02% | 06.04% |
| A/MApophatic/Mind | Females – 19Males – 14 | Females – 03.82%Males – 02.82% | 06.64% |

TABLE 1 *Descriptive Statistics of Spiritual Type Scores*

The distribution of adjusted spiritual type outcome results is reported in Figure 2. A notably higher concentration of spiritual type preferences aligns with kataphatic outcomes; 87.32% (n = 434) of the total distribution of scores, compared to 12.68% (n = 63) of apophatic outcomes. The distribution of scores between mind and heart outcomes align higher toward heart outcomes; 56.54% (n = 281) of the total distribution of scores, compared to 43.46% (n = 216) of mind outcomes.



FIGURE 2 *Distribution of Spiritual Type Scores*

The data indicate that participants tend to align with favored catechetical models of faith formation. Expressed spiritual type alignment most likely began to form in their developmental years as children and adolescents, encouraged equally by denominational and ecclesiastical faith traditions. The data also indicates a draw on the part of the student to attend Corban University, further complimenting their preferred academic and spiritual formation model as indicated by their choice of attending this specific faith-based institution. As reported in a previous study with this institution—with the comparison of analysis noted here—“The sample, a reflection of its greater population, maintains consistency in being able to accommodate K/M and K/H spiritual types predominately … the school, nonetheless, seems to foster an environment aligned more so to a kataphatic type of spirituality.”[[23]](#endnote-23) In this case review, institutional harmony in pedagogical approaches to spiritual type coherence remains consistent across fourteen years of collected data, particularly noted within the K/M and K/H type distinctions. As a result, the inference remains strong that models of instruction lean heavily toward kataphatic inclinations of faith formation. At this point, a query surfaces within this type of kataphatic preferred learning setting. Namely, to what degree are emphases of faith formation aided or impeded by digital influences in the classroom?

**3 Digitally distracted faith formation?**

As Ronald Rolheiser so aptly noted shortly before the rise of Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and all the rest, we are “distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Little did he realize that distraction would serve this self-fulfilling prophecy, especially the distraction brought on by digital technology. For some time now, college classrooms have seen a sizable shift and uptick in the use of digital devices (smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc.) by both students and instructors alike. In many cases, digital device use allows educational stakeholders access to a wider breadth of information, resources, and people at every level of learning. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more classrooms shifted to the increased use of technology and digital engagement to facilitate classroom learning.

This is most exemplified in “hybrid” approaches in models of instruction. As instructors modified teaching methods to accommodate “remote” learners, the shift in and out of the classroom required greater engagement with accessible forms of academic instruction, mainly mediated through increased digital teaching and learning strategies. However, as shifts in educational engagement exhibited increased mediation through digital forms of instruction, there seemed to be increased amounts of distraction in the classroom at the same time. Indeed, this is nothing new. As McCoy noted in 2013: “As more students use digital devices, research shows their use is causing more classroom learning distractions.”[[25]](#endnote-25) He further observed, “When college students’ multi-task with digital devices in classrooms, research indicates it may hamper their ability to pay attention. This behavior, research suggests, has become more habitual, automatic, and distracting.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Fast forward to 2021—especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic—simple survey and observation on the part of both instructor and student alike affirm the situation has in most cases not gotten better, but worse.

Worsening distraction through digital device employment is not merely isolated to colleges and universities in the United States. Globally, digital device usage in student learning outcomes is a concern for both learner and instructor in cross-cultural environments as well. For example, research in Pakistan—particularly isolating mobile phone usage among medical students in the classroom—found:

The use of digital devices in the classroom was found prevalent and causing significant distraction in learning. Most of the students consider it as their right to use these devices and they believe that this right outweighs the distraction caused in learning. Students also believe that teachers should only council [sic] the students in case of class disruption and there should not be any penalties for this behavior.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Research conducted between U.S. and African university students found that addiction to the internet, learning style preference, contextual and individual student factors significantly influence the intensity of student in-class digital distraction.[[28]](#endnote-28) Investigators in Idia found “Students’ digital engagement affects their instructors’ pedagogy and classroom communication, as Indian faculty members have identified digital devices as a source of distraction during class time as well as a potential source of stress among teachers.”[[29]](#endnote-29) While mounting evidence suggests continuing problems between classroom instruction and digitally-based student distraction across the globe, the question at hand is, what are the effects on approaches found within spiritual formation models of instruction within emerging adulthood classrooms?

While evidence suggests aspects of digital engagement aid in assessing and guiding students in individuated spiritual formation processes,[[30]](#endnote-30) there nonetheless remains apprehension about digitally disrupting the classroom's individual and communal learning structures. Detweiler rightly observes, “In our electronic age there is so much electronic miscommunication. When we can’t read each other’s faces we eliminate important nonverbal clues. So much drama could be avoided through face-to-face (but potentially awkward) conversation. Reading faces is essential in a relationship.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Being “present with” one another is a vital component in learning settings, especially when one is pursuing deeper understanding and reflection on their relationship between God and with others. “The more *present* we are to the now, the more joy we tap into.”[[32]](#endnote-32) As a result, it is not merely individual interaction that is obstructed by digitally disrupting forces. Attention to communal components of spiritual formation, both within and outside the classroom, is also impacted.[[33]](#endnote-33) Cyzewski agrees: “There’s a lot of competition for our attention today, and our spiritual practices have an uphill battle.”[[34]](#endnote-34) He also notes,

We need to talk about this in the context of soul care and spiritual formation because our fragmented mental state makes it extremely hard to pause for the often slow, silent work of God in our lives. We are being aggressively pursued by technology companies who want to capture our attention and then collect our data so that they can sell us stuff. If we aren’t aware of how distracting our technology can be, we will inevitably be influenced by it in ways we would never have chosen at the outset.[[35]](#endnote-35)

This is especially important to those pedagogical approaches centering on apophatic nuances.

Unique to apophatic learning postures, specifically, we note, “It begins as an act of humility, acknowledging how much we don’t know about God … This realization allows us to respect the impenetrable mystery of God and softens us in relation to our neighbors.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Therefore, being attuned to God and one another in this type of apophatic instructional setting—free from the distraction of our devices—allows us to lean into greater participation in mystery with God and neighbor in our collective learning experience. However, we further note that the move toward increased usage of classroom technology continues to be problematic. As a result, “Because of the widespread availability of computers and mobile communication devices, students live in worlds defined by multitasking … Increasingly, students seem to lack the ability (or the desire) to be fully present in any one context, preferring virtual dispersion to embodied and situated connections with God, people, and texts.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Take, for example, the competitive spirit between the instructor’s attempt to aid students in focusing on the subject at hand and students slipping attention spans.

Student attention spans—and even most notably our collective culture’s attention span—are continuing to slip at warp speed. Not long ago, in 2000, before the digital revolution, we managed to retain attention spans somewhere in the neighborhood of twelve seconds. Since then, they have dropped to eight seconds.[[38]](#endnote-38) The urgency for creating space for a more profound encounter with the mystery of God both individually and with others should remain a primary area of focus for our pedagogical interest over and against waning attention spans. During class time interactions, apophatic awareness, and mystery-encounter—creating the kind of space for encountering God and engaging with others—remain a daunting task when frustrated by digitally distracted attention spans.

Thus, increased attention-focus and apophatic awareness remain plausible keys to greater engagement with the mystery of God in the classroom. “Attention leads to awareness,” observes Comer.[[39]](#endnote-39) “All the contemplatives agree. The mystics point out that what’s missing is awareness. Meaning, in the chronic problem of human beings’ felt experience of distance from God, God isn’t usually the culprit … Our awareness of God is the problem, and it’s acute.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Eilers concurs: “When teaching theology, mystery is unavoidable and—perhaps less obviously—it’s essential.”[[41]](#endnote-41) The essential nature of grappling with mystery requires more focused attention by both instructor and student, aware of the ineffable and indescribable present moment. All too often, however, “The *regardless power* of my iPod (and my cell phone and my Netflix subscription and all the rest) invites me to habitually ignore the limits where God’s love waits to make me whole.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

As a corrective to this dilemma, the spiritual formation instructor ought to acknowledge: “That’s why mystery is *essential* for teaching and learning in theology: its presence confirms that our attention still rests on the Living God, and not on some lesser thing of our making.”[[43]](#endnote-43) In this case, the “lesser thing” being the constant interruption and distraction of our devices. Increased attention on the subject and nature of God’s inexpressible mystery is helpful, especially in highly digitized kataphatic learning contexts. So, what, then, are the fundamental issues for aiding instructors and students in moving away from digital distraction to greater mystical attention and awareness?

Fundamentally, two main issues are at the root of student digital distraction. The first involves simple respect and courtesy among classmates. As Seemiller notes, “Students who are using their devices might have their attention drawn away from a group discussion or project, lose focus from the class causing their peers to miss out on peer learning, and further, have their phones ring, beep, buzz, or vibrate causing an audible distraction.”[[44]](#endnote-44) This is especially problematic when the emphasis for the class period is aiding the class as a whole in appropriating apophatic constructs: silence, solitude, contemplative awareness, openness to a sense of being present with God and others, etc.

Second, “…when students use their devices, they are pulled away from the learning environment into a virtual world. This can result in distracted and disconnected learning in which students mentally enter and exit the course content.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Having students tune in and out in eight-to-ten-minute intervals does not foster the learning required for engaging concepts and principles related to mystery, especially. Even students themselves know that using their devices during class divides their attention. One study of college students found that ninety percent (90%) of students “indicated not paying attention as one of the three biggest disadvantages to using a digital device in class for purposes not related to the class.”[[46]](#endnote-46) A survey of young adults by Microsoft found that seventy-seven percent of them, when asked, “When nothing is occupying my attention, the first thing I do is reach for my phone,” answered, “yes.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Establishing classroom policies and guidelines that focus on respect, courtesy, and limited digital engagement continues to be beneficial. At this point, however, one might ask, “What of the student with learning disabilities or who requires special academic accommodations?”

Considering the issue noted above, regardless of student situations, it remains essential to maximize teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions for the benefit of the *entire* class. Creating digital policies or practices that hinder or hamper student learning—especially those requiring special accommodations—is in most cases viewed as disadvantageous. More and more students are arriving on colleges campuses with varied forms of learning limitations. It, therefore, remains imperative “to provide an engaging environment for students to learn best, and for some, it means incorporating adaptive technology, and for others, it means having them disconnect from distracting behavior on their personal devices.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Issues like these will need to be addressed when both kataphatic and apophatic ideas are discussed and experienced within spiritual formation learning contexts. Students with specific learning and academic constraints require equal appropriation and accommodation in learning collaboration. Equally, they desire and necessitate the same type of equity afforded all students when appropriating and acquiring a deeper understanding of the mystery of God. Thus, when engaging all students—in all activities—within spiritual formation classes, one must consider both digital technology’s benefits as well as its distracting role.

Accordingly, pedagogical approaches in spiritual formation classes necessitate greater awareness of the Christian faith's kataphatic and apophatic postures that remain beneficial for all students. Instructors must appropriately look “beyond debates about the impact of digital devices on learning” and realize “there are growing apprehensions about the increased role that digital devices play in students’ lives.”[[49]](#endnote-49) As Cho and Littenberg-Tobias acknowledge, “People often view technologies through the lenses of their attitudes and experiences. Decisions about whether and how to use a technology are influenced by values and beliefs about what a technology ought to do.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Assisting students in a more holistic and theologically reflective assessment of technology's role in their spiritual lives will prove beneficial both in and out of the classroom. In turn, limiting the types of distractions digital devices bring into the classroom raises a further question related to the apophatic predicament: “What apophatic support structures and learning strategies are beneficial?” With this emphasis in mind, we provide some unassuming recommendations.

**4 Moving in the right direction: balancing between the extremes**

“The language of Scripture,” as Prosperi declares, “is clear that the final end of the covenant of love between God and God’s people is not simply loving *knowledge* in the mode of possession, but knowing love in the mode of reciprocal *belonging*.”[[51]](#endnote-51) Kataphatic inclinations found in Christian spiritual expression are typically grounded in this type of possessed knowledge, the *via affimativa*. Through rigorous exegetical analysis and strict theological systems, primarily taught in a linear progression, the student of Christian spirituality is routinely drawn into cognitive, rational, and knowable apprehensions of their relationship with God and others. Whereas apophatic distinctiveness finds coherence in the “mode of reciprocal belonging,” a movement beyond knowing, seeking both longing and existential encounter with the ineffable, the indescribable, the *via negativa*. Or as Boyer and Hall make clear, “… the point most relevant for our discussion, in the recurrent biblical affirmation that the Creator is not just different from creatures, not just exalted above creatures, but exalted so far above creature that he is beyond their ken altogether.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Both apophatic and kataphatic inviolability harmoniously acknowledge “the ecstatic dispossession of trusting faith must be part of the very content of the life of glory, no less than the restful and secure possession entailed in sight.”[[53]](#endnote-53) More explicit recognition of the central biblical ideal of: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9, NASB). Engaging students in the study of the doctrine of God must invariably balance between the knowability of God as a revealed Creator and speaking of God as existing beyond knowledge and comprehension in mystical awareness.

However, what tends to be overemphasized in predominately kataphatic learning contexts is the knowability and revelation of God as a personal being. Critical, excessive attention to exegetical analysis and precise theological language may steer the student’s attention away from a deeper understanding of the “abiding with” nature and characteristics of relationship with God (Jhn. 15:5; Col. 1:27; 3:1-3). As Payton notes: “… positive [kataphatic] theology not only sets forth what can be said and should be learned and confessed by Christians propositionally, but it also serves as the taking-off point from which Christians proceed on to the worship and honor of the one who is still beyond our loftiest and most exalted thoughts, even those built on Scripture itself.”[[54]](#endnote-54) What often gets overlooked is the draw toward more profound mystical encounters with the One “no one can fathom” (Isa. 40:26, 28). “This mysticism is not avoidance of or escape from Scripture, but reverence and awe before the God who has so graciously condescended to reveal himself to us at all in Scripture.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

As a problematic counter-posture, much of contemporary Christian spirituality “…tends to view the spiritual life as a static possession rather than a dynamic and ever-developing growth toward wholeness in the image of Christ.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Our overtaxed and highly technologically integrated lives, along with the need for constant urgency, cause us to forget that God’s unfolding mystery surrounds us. Thus, alternatives for engaging students in examining and experiencing the profound mysteries of God are encouraged within highly digitized and predominantly kataphatic learning contexts. These alternatives center around two main spheres for consideration: awareness and experience.

*Awareness* – a general awareness of apophaticism and the mystery of God is foundational to understanding spiritual types while potentially producing a more robust spiritual formation learning environment. Here, the student is taught through spiritual type theory that “investigative mystery revolves very intentionally around what is *unknown*, whereas a revelation mystery revolves around what is *known*.”[[57]](#endnote-57) The difference between kataphatic knowability—“investigative mystery”—and apophatic unknowability—“revelation mystery”—is evident. For the kataphatic, “Western confidence in the ability of the Christian mind to explain truth and account for the ways of God with humanity came to recognize almost no bounds.”[[58]](#endnote-58) According to the kataphatic preference, the primacy of God’s revelation of Himself is viewed as central to continuing growth in Christ. As has been true throughout Christian history, the mystical and apophatic posture before God is “… exactly that living, experiential embrace that transcends a dry intellectualism and that engages the whole person with existential depth instead.”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Moving beyond knowable, intellectually, theological synthesized appropriations of faith, thus, speaks more to apophatic preference. The two equally necessary appropriations of God's knowability and mystery are not overly challenging for students to comprehend. In a fundamental and natural sense, “If God himself is the supreme or foundational instance of dimensional mystery, then it seems that we ought to expect God to be both reasonable and beyond reason in some way analogous to this.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Aiding students in proper understanding and awareness of God's knowability and His ineffability should be appropriately balanced within any faith formation setting. To aid the student’s awareness of God’s mystery, consider some primary strategies for reading God’s Word, the Bible.

On the kataphatic side of the spectrum, more apparent but often unstated within western contexts, the reader of Scripture is more concerned with the following activities and outcomes: covering as much text as possible; a linear process; seeking to master the text; the text as an object to use; and analytical, critical, and judgment-making approach; along with a problem-solving mentality.[[61]](#endnote-61) As the case review above demonstrates, the student naturally derives and implements kataphatic tendencies into their devotional and analytical study of God’s Word in most of their Bible, theology, and ministry coursework. What is often overlooked are the more apophatic postures and approaches to intake of God’s Word: focusing on small portions; an in-depth process; allowing the text to master; the text as a subject that shapes; humble, submissive, willing loving approach; and openness to mystery.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Students in overly kataphatic learning contexts may miss out on the experiential power of transcendence found in the pages of Scripture, primarily when they are only taught to analyze the Bible through systematic, linear, and intellectual inquiry methodologies. DeYoung encourages the reader, “Instead of skimming and scrolling, we sit with, savor, and soak in the words of Scripture. We ask: how does this text repay repeated engagement, and attentive reflection? If we let these words and thoughts sink in, how do they shape other texts we read? How do they settle in around us and redirect our attention?”[[63]](#endnote-63) Guiding students in a classroom exercise toward reading selected passages with these emphases in mind can prove beneficial. How else, however, might one gain awareness of the mystery of God in the learning environment?

Closely associated with the emphasis on the student’s interaction with Bible reading above, encouraging students, both in and out of class, to engage in the ancient holy habit of *Lectio Divina* will assist them in increased awareness of both the knowability and mystery of God. As Baxter notes: “Throughout Christian history, reading Scripture has been undertaken not just for gathering doctrines but also, and perhaps more often, for renewing the heart.”[[64]](#endnote-64) Thus, *Lectio Divina’s* fourfold moments of *Lectio*, *Meditatio*, *Oratio*, and *Contemplatio* can help move the student through disciplined spirituality to slow down and engage more affectively, rather than cognitively in their posture when reading the Bible. As Mulholland encourages, “Lectio is a posture of approach and a means of encounter with a text that enables the text to become a place of transforming encounter with God.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Additionally, a powerful strength for the student engaging in the practice of *Lectio Divina* “… is its holistic interplay between the sensing-intuitive and thinking-feeling aspects of our preference patterns.”[[66]](#endnote-66)

Through *Lectio* and other devotional and formational reading modes, one is made aware of the balance between kataphatic and apophatic boundaries when participating in communal and individual experiences of this type of exercise. “There is an important place for informational reading of Scripture and for exegetical and topical methods of Bible study,” observes Boa. Nevertheless, “Those who approach Scripture in this way often overlook the formational approach that centers on speaking to the heart more than informing the mind.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Encouraging and moving students toward adopting this basic framework of Bible reading encourages divine mystery awareness necessary for a more holistic approach to faith formation. To further support the student’s intake, reading, and mystery-encounter engagement with Scripture, the student should be encouraged to read from a physical copy rather than a digital one. There are compelling reasons for this move from digital to print text but consider the following.

The brain's structures have much to do with how we interact with reading text. The “analytical” side of the left side of the brain supports the essential functions of logic, language, mathematical reasoning, rationality, and objectivity. Printed text pumps “up the muscles of critical reasoning, logic, order, and abstract thinking.”[[68]](#endnote-68) For students, “These capacities require mentoring, discipline, and extensive repetition.”[[69]](#endnote-69) The printed text demands the development and exercise of these left-brain skills. Thus, printed text favors the left side of the brain. However, the “creative” right side of the brain supports the essential functions of thought, intuition, creativity, artistic expression, risk-taking, and operations suited toward fantasy. With images displacing the dominant medium of text, the right brain began to take on a role in shaping our thinking. As Hipps notes: “The digital age has transformed the meaning of literacy. We still rely heavily on text, but the text-based communication of the internet and instant messaging generate a fundamentally different kind of literacy—an unusual right-brained sort of literacy.”[[70]](#endnote-70) As print-versus-digital reading investigators have found:

Digital text and the printed book require very different energies and create separate muscles in the mind. Most books present an extensive, in-depth monologue, a thorough argument carefully crafted in linear, successive paragraphs and pages … The left-brain is heavily engaged by such activity. But Internet text presents a nonlinear web of interconnected pages and a vast mosaic of hyperlinks with no fundamental beginning, middle, or end. We are immersed in a boundless, endless data space. These are the conditions specially suited to the right-brain.[[71]](#endnote-71)

Early on, when reading from CRT displays was more normative, reading was usually slower than reading from print.[[72]](#endnote-72) But, as digital displays made their way into our lives—and our pockets—a higher cognitive load on the reader began to emerge, different than reading from print.[[73]](#endnote-73) Readers usually report on a stronger feeling of ownership when reading a printed text compared to a digital one.[[74]](#endnote-74) They also frequently report on disorientation problems when reading from a digital display.[[75]](#endnote-75) Furthermore, for students in a more academically suited setting, readers usually prefer to read long, academic texts in print, whereas they prefer to read short texts on a digital display.[[76]](#endnote-76) Finally, we note that the display format usually affects text comprehension. For example, one study reports lower comprehension of digital content when compared to printed text.[[77]](#endnote-77) Encouraging students to practice devotional, academic study, and *Lectio Divina* types of reading with a physical copy of the Bible may support the kinds of deep reading found in more apophatic postures of Christian spirituality.

One further example for aiding students in apophatic awareness is teaching what the mystery of God necessitates. Here our pedagogical focus centers on two primary constructs of needed awareness: recognition and celebration. In *recognition* of mystery, Eilers says, “Recognition could take the form of a weekly journaling activity in which they record instances when their theological comprehension ran up against its dimensional limits.”[[78]](#endnote-78) In this example, while the student is journaling, they develop an awareness of the boundaries of their intellectual and cognitive apprehension of God's character, nature and works through normative kataphatic capacities. In turn, they are moved to recognize where preferences and patterns move beyond rational, explainable, and comprehensible constraints. Speaking of *celebration,* he says, “… even more effective is teaching students that theological mystery is an occasion for prayer. We might show them how to compose a collect prayer centered on their encounter with mystery and then invite them to pray it in class.”[[79]](#endnote-79) Here, the focus allows the student to create an inner dialogue that challenges them to move beyond normative structures in their spiritual habits and practices. Shifting their attention beyond kataphatic proclivities encourages awareness of encounters with mystery through the composition of a general and straightforward prayer. These awareness exercises can be done individually as an out-of-class activity or corporately with their classmates. These types of engagements allow for pursuing and fostering a deeper awareness of God's mystery in the student’s daily experience. But what of the second consideration, experience?

*Experience* – encouraging assignments and exercises centered on apophatic possibilities both within and outside the classroom can involve having students participate in either classic spiritual discipline options or creative assignments, such as “soul projects.”[[80]](#endnote-80) One such soul project utilized well with students in the case review above is the combination of “Search for Convergence” and “Overcome by Awe.”[[81]](#endnote-81) In this project, the student keeps a journal in which they record unusual convergences and encounters with the mystery of God. Students then come to class prepared to discuss what they have discovered or interacted online with classmates through a *VoiceThread*.[[82]](#endnote-82) As Setran et al. note, “Our studies and subject matter should lead us to times of being overcome by awe or mystery. Make note of times when the course material (this could be a reading, a lab experience, or a new perspective provided in the class) has given you an awe experience.”[[83]](#endnote-83) The goal is to encourage the student through experience to engage more intentionally with the mystery of God in their everyday encounters. As students share from individual experiences, it encourages others to think differently about practicing their Christian spirituality.

In the realm of spiritual disciplines, we have already noted the way students can potentially gain both awareness and experience through *Lectio Divina*. Take, for example, another closely related spiritual discipline, “reflection.” Reflection, by definition, refers to looking at “… what is occurring or has just occurred in order to determine if effective movement is happening.”[[84]](#endnote-84) In this case, *moving* the student closer to an awareness of God’s transcendence in mystery. As Dunn and Sundene note: “We need to find ways to practice reflection until it becomes a regular part of our ministry rhythms.”[[85]](#endnote-85) Students are encouraged to experience strategies within the spiritual discipline of reflection—which they also term “holy pause”—especially suited for encountering the mystery of God: talk less, pause more; develop reflection questions; journal; seek multifaceted feedback; map patterns and movement; and fast. In the first (talking less) and last (fasting) strategies, the student can use fewer words and talk less as “… a way to demonstrate our own trust in the Father’s wisdom.”[[86]](#endnote-86) Pausing through the absence of using words allows the student to open themselves to the possibility of being present with and hearing from the Lord. They can also use fasting as a way in which “… we set aside a distraction—such as food, television or music—to clear the way for the Lord to speak to us and for us to hear his wisdom.”[[87]](#endnote-87) Fasting becomes a powerful tool for removing what distracts the student—including digital distractions—in favor of deeper reflection and engagement with the person of God. These two spiritual disciplines and others can become a means to the end of seeking an encounter of mystery and presence with God. Another beneficial disciplined experience is that of prayer.

In general, “… prayer can be divided into two basic types: cataphatic prayer, which prays to God using one’s intellect and language, and apophatic prayer, which prays by surrendering both intellect and language.”[[88]](#endnote-88) The kataphatic tend to structure their prayer life devoted to routine, linear processes, cognitive engagement, and analytical form. While this may bring a sense of constancy and comfort, the regularity of such prayer may miss out on other central components of more profound and intimate conversations with God. “When we get the sense that our prayer life is missing something,” observes Blondeau, “… it’s a great deal easier to vacillate between redoubling our efforts and being more disciplined, or just … stop bothering with it.”[[89]](#endnote-89) The last thing we want for our students is to entrench them in repetitive cycles of ritualized and regimented prayer. Encouraging students in their prayer life to be more open to the unknowing, transcendent, inexpressible, but intimately relatable God aids them in their journey of discipleship. In this way, “… prayer becomes thought of as intimacy with God by way of moving the human spirit beyond the structure of normal everyday experience.”[[90]](#endnote-90) Boyer and Hall provide a cumulative outlook on the discipline of prayer by saying:

… if God is incomprehensible in the way Christianity suggests, then we have very good grounds for praying with faith and humility… Prayer need not be regarded as an attempt to convince an unwilling or ignorant God to act, nor is it merely therapy for the prayer-er with no objective effect. Instead, as we ponder how our personal and corporate interaction with a surpassingly great God is similar to, but also strikingly different from, our interaction with one another, we can enter more deeply into the life of prayer with the confidence and hope that both Scripture and Christian tradition hold out.[[91]](#endnote-91)

In summary, Blondeau brings rich insight to guiding students to a deeper and richer experience in their prayer life by noting: “As the spiritual life matures, the nature of all forms of prayer matures. The reason apophatic prayer tends to take on an air of superiority is only because it is the necessary step beyond a cataphatic prayer rut that has lost touch with its depth.”[[92]](#endnote-92) Both in and out of the classroom, encouraging students toward a much deeper experience of spiritual discipline and robust prayer life will bring about the kataphatic and apophatic balance we, and they, desire. For both spiritual disciplines and a rich prayer life alike—returning to one final thought on digital distraction—“As you gain clarity about the spiritual practices that can help you remain rooted in Christ, such as a walk in silence, journaling grateful prayers, or reading scripture daily, you can fit technology in its proper place. If your smartphone or social media begins interfering with the healthy practices you need in order to thrive, then you’ll know it’s time to experiment with barriers.”[[93]](#endnote-93) Thus, through the agency of awareness and experience, deeper connections to the mystery of God are reinforced, most notably against the grain of highly digitized kataphatic learning contexts.

**5 Conclusion**

This article has put forward the premise that the emerging adult’s Christian life is more than their preferences and patterns of expressed spirituality. There is more in the way of offering a well-rounded and robust faith experience. This endeavor, as has been noted, can take place both within and out of the classroom. For the kataphatic and the apophatic alike, balancing between extremes leads to deeper awareness and appreciation of the manifold dimensions of God’s transformative work in their lives. His goodness and His grace through the agency of balanced spiritual types will ultimately benefit the body of faith. As Boyer and Hall remind us, “… those, who have understood the revealed truth of God may be in danger of subtly allowing the truth we know to annul or confine the holy mystery that is beyond knowledge.”[[94]](#endnote-94) They also affirm, “… to deny our knowledge of God is to fall into skepticism and to lose the gospel; and just as surely, to affirm knowledge of God in the wrong way is to fall into idolatry and to lose the biblical God.”[[95]](#endnote-95) Every Christian is susceptible to erring to the extremes. As the review case above demonstrates, in predominantly kataphatic learning contexts, the necessity for gaining both awareness *of*, and experience *in*, the ineffable mysteries of God are paramount to continued growth and conformity to the image of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (Col. 1:28).

The limitations of the presented case review recognize that each learning environment will need to assess the degree to which there are imbalances. Utilizing spiritual type theory in an informative and experiential way can help facilitate the kinds of holistic learning professors desire for their students in spiritual formation learning contexts. We need to be reminded as we go along in the journey, “We worship reasonably, not just because of what we can grasp of the glory, but also because of the revealed mystery of a glory too deep for any grasping.”[[96]](#endnote-96) Equally valuable are the vital attributes of moving students toward greater awareness and experience of the mystery of God, especially in overly extended kataphatic settings. As Karl Rahner put it, a final goal acknowledges “… the human person is the mystery of infinite emptiness, and God is the mystery of infinite fullness.”[[97]](#endnote-97) As emerging adults come to see themselves in this light, helping and guiding them in their continuing journey of faith development necessitates a well-rounded approach to pedagogical spiritual formation practices. May we commit ourselves to walk alongside them in this process, and may we do so with less distraction from our devices.

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88. Alexander Blondeau. “Prayer Does Not Work: Paul Tillich and Centering Prayer,” *Word & World*, Vol. 35 (1) (2105): 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Blondeau. “Prayer Does Not Work,” 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Blondeau, “Prayer Does Not Work,” 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Boyer and Hall. *The Mystery of God*, 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Blondeau, “Prayer Does Not Work,”54. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Cyzewski, *5 Sul Care Practices*, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Boyer and Hall. *The Mystery of God*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Boyer and Hall. *The Mystery of God*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Boyer and Hall. *The Mystery of God*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Rahner in Boa. *Conformed to His Image*, 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)