

Too much practice: Second thoughts on a theological movement

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

Few things are more humbling for a professor than to hear your classroom assertions parroted back to you. In the student's puerile response you hear an echo of your own pronouncement—but on undergraduate lips the thought sounds unbearably stupid.

I've come to feel a bit that way upon rereading *Resident Aliens*. While I still believe just about everything Stanley Hauerwas and I said in that book, I've come to have a few regrets.

In *Resident Aliens* we stressed that Christianity is a communal tradition that gives us the skills, habits and practices that enable us truthfully to know the world in the way of Christ and subversively to resist the toxic pressures of the world's godlessness. We got more specific about how the church does that in a sequel, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, which bore the subtitle *Exercises for Christian Practice*. A constant theme in the second book was the necessity of developing practices commensurate with the peculiar demands of Christian discipleship in North American culture. In a chapter titled "Practice Discipleship" we even quoted from a *Wall Street Journal* article in order to praise the U.S. Marines for demonstrating that, if one desired to transform the character of drug-dealing or racist young adults, one could do so only by teaching them practices that were different from the practices of modern American culture.

Of course, along the way we cited philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a practice as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the

results that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

Note anything missing in MacIntyre's thick definition of "practice"? God.

Hauerwas and I did not originate the notion that Christianity is best defined as a "socially established cooperative human activity" rather than as a set of beliefs or a type of experience. But we certainly gave a strong shove to that idea, and to the notion that there is nothing wrong with the church that can't be cured by restoring it as a place of practice. I bear some responsibility for the now popular conviction that Christianity is a practice and that Christians are best described as people who have adopted certain practices. So I feel I should share why I am now having grave doubts about describing Christian spirituality as a practice.

Practice has become a primary term not only in describing Christianity but in speaking about religion in general. It is acceptable to speak of Christianity as a practice in company who would not tolerate a conversation about "Jesus Christ as Lord." That should tip us off to some of the theological hazards of this approach.

Resident Aliens did not introduce the idea that Christianity is a set of countercultural practices. Søren Kierkegaard in 1850 wrote *Practice in Christianity* (sometimes translated as *Training in Christianity*). Kierkegaard attacked the idea that one becomes a Christian simply by accepting intellectually some supposedly rational set of arguments for the validity of Christianity. He asserted that the challenge of being a Christian is not to understand Christ or devise some philosophic system based on Christ but to obey Christ, to follow him, to put one's trust into practice. Kierkegaard based his approach on the peculiar nature of Christ himself and on the way that Christ taught—through parables rather than abstract ideas, through miraculous actions rather than metaphysical speculation. As Kierkegaard said, Christ calls people not to admiration but to discipleship.

While Kierkegaard's thought has something in it that presages the current infatuation with Christianity as a practice, the striking thing is that his practical Christianity is based on the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity that is seen in Jesus Christ. By contrast, much contemporary talk about practice appears to be based on certain vague anthropological (rather than theological) assertions about the way human beings behave—such as that our lives go better when we inculcate certain allegedly salubrious habits like Sabbath-

keeping, prayer, meditation and hospitality.

Kierkegaard is fairly clear that Christians ought to live in a certain way because of the odd God we have in Jesus Christ. Discipleship has few intellectual allies. It is counter to the way human beings are wired. Jesus is against our natural inclination. Therefore, as I read Kierkegaard, practices are those ways that one must live if one is convinced that Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God.

A vast literature has arisen to extol the virtues of Christian practices apart from the God who makes Christian practice interesting in the first place. Recently a pastor of my acquaintance applied for a grant at a church-related foundation and was told by another friend who had received a grant, “Whatever you propose to them, you need to be sure that the word *practice* is in the application. That’s the only way you’ll get the money.”

One of the things that first appealed to me about the discovery of Christianity as a practice was that the practices of any faith are so wonderfully specific and odd. They tend to be incomprehensible without reference to the specific experience of God that has occurred in that faith. This approach seemed to offer a wonderful corrective to the classic liberal theological construal of religion as a set of ideas (beliefs) about the divine.

But classic liberal theology of the 19th-century German variety is hard to break. A warning sign of the possible error of construing Christianity primarily as a practice is the propensity of books on Christian practice to describe the Christian faith in general. Christianity, generally conceived, shares much with other faiths, generally conceived. Generic conceptions of Christianity, or any other religion, as a practice are as intellectually misleading as conceiving of Christianity as a system of general beliefs. When Christianity is conceived as a practice, a set of paths toward God which some people have found helpful but which lead in much the same direction as every other path, then Christianity has been misconstrued.

For instance, a number of Christianity-as-practice books extol the virtues of recovering the practice of keeping the Sabbath. Yet I search in vain in these descriptions for the theological grounding of such a peculiar activity. Nor do they recognize the ways in which Jesus Christ, a well-documented Sabbath-breaker, is presented in the Gospels as inimical to the Third Commandment.

In *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments and the Christian Life* Hauerwas and I commended keeping the Sabbath as a Christian discipline, but we stressed that it is a practice done in the light of Christ, and we tried to indicate the tension that Jesus introduced into the notion of Sabbath-keeping. When Sabbath is commended apart from the story of the salvation and sustenance of Israel as God's people—when it is commended as a means of helping us achieve balance in life, a way of helping us stay centered, or a mode of resistance against the clutches of consumerism—then Israel's way of keeping Sabbath becomes degraded and incomprehensible.

Nowhere in the faith of Israel is keeping the Sabbath presented as a practice that is good for everybody no matter which god you worship. Sabbath is what Yahweh commands Israel to do. Sabbath is what we are compelled to do on the basis of our attempt to love the curious God who has loved us.

For some time Hauerwas has engaged in a polemic against “practices based on atheism.” I worry that our infatuation with practices could be but the latest phase of atheism. Since God is now mute and absent, we try to locate a set of habits that will make us feel better about our situation.

For instance, Karen Armstrong says, in *The Case for God*, “religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of the mind and heart.” Apparently the god that Armstrong is making the case for is the innocuous god that most North Americans already believe in. By defining religion as “a practical discipline”—that is, a set of practices—advocates like Armstrong seem to feel that they can sidestep the tough theological decision required when one is confronted with the question, “Is this god whom you are following actually God or not?”

My worry is that attention to practices deflects our attention from the living God. With the focus on practices, Christianity quietly morphs into a species of unbelief; we take revelation into our own hands.

The question to ask of any allegedly Christian practice is, “Who is the God being served through this practice?” Pelagianism is a tough thing to shake. The idea that we must do something for God before God will do anything for us, the concept that my relationship with God is sustained by my actions or feelings or inclinations, the notion that “religion” is something I do rather than God's effect upon me—all these ideas appear to be lurking behind contemporary discussions of practice.

John Wesley could be justly regarded as a father of the Christian practice movement. Influenced by William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Wesley pioneered and perfected a number of spiritual disciplines, like small accountability groups, lay Bible studies and other methods whereby Christians may "grow in grace." These disciplines have wonderful resonance today. Yet toward the end of his life, after his movement of spiritual discipline had spread throughout the English-speaking world, Wesley wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

Typically, Wesley mentions "doctrine" before he says "discipline." He worries about "the form of religion without the power." I think Wesley is pointing here toward a problem that also afflicts current talk of Christianity as a practice.

Worship's object determines the nature of worship. Some of the "spiritual practices" being urged upon us today seem too tame for a people who are evoked by the wild, untamable Word. Speaking as a preacher, I would argue that the spiritual practices needed by faithful Christian preachers are those that give us the guts to be in conversation with, and to speak up for, a true and living God who loves to meet people through the Word.

The great Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth emphasized that preachers require a peculiar kind of prayer life. Prayer for the preacher "is only serious searching prayer, not prayer as sweet and seemly devotion at the day's dawn or close, but prayer as an ingredient of the day's work, pastoral and theological prayer, priest's prayer." I am reminded of the preacher who, in a discussion of "necessary homiletical disciplines," said that for him the important step in sermon preparation was a two-mile jog at dawn on Sunday. Why? "God uses that time to get me pumped up enough to have the guts to stand up and preach at 11 o'clock to people who mostly don't want to hear what I feel compelled to say."

If Sabbath is mainly about taking time to be spiritual, then Islam and other faiths have marvelous disciplines for taking over time in the name of God. The faithful follower stops everything and prays. It must be an effective way of taking time for

God. Similar disciplines are practiced in monastic spirituality.

Mainstream Christianity has generally taken a different view. We do not, perhaps we cannot, take time for God. God in Christ takes time *for us* and interrupts us, throughout the day, if we have the eyes of faith to see it. God takes time *from us*. God does not wait for us to fine-tune the spiritual disciplines. God grants us the freedom to be about our vocations in the world, doing what we have to do in this life. Then God suddenly shows up, unexpectedly becomes an event in our time, disrupts our lives. While we are busy planning a wedding, God interrupts, impregnates and enlists a young woman in a revolution (Luke 2). Eventually, God promises to take all time from us; all of us will die and be subsumed into God-determined time, like it or not. An eschatological concern is one of the basic Christian affirmations that tends to be absent from discussions of Christianity as a practice.

Christians have learned from bitter experience that many of our allegedly helpful means of climbing up to God are easily perverted into ways of defending ourselves against God. We're always in danger of reducing Christianity to a matter of our experience. The true God can never be known through our practices but comes to us only as a gift of God, only as revelation. This is why I can say (as a Wesleyan) that Christian practices are not primarily what we do. Rather, our practice of the faith is something that God does for us, in us, often despite us.

Today's talk about spiritual practices could be just one more in a long line of attempts to take time on our terms. Thank God we don't have to devise a set of practices to take time for God; in Jesus Christ, God takes us.

This article will be part of the forthcoming book Reflections on the Spiritual Life (Westminster John Knox), edited by Allan Hugh Cole.