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The Sin of Withholding Empathy:
Authoritarian Detachment and the Paradoxes of "Belonging" in High-Control Christian Communities

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Abstract

This presentation examines the sin of withholding empathy as the generative logic by which high-control Christian communities construct distorted forms of belonging. Drawing on New Religious Movement scholarship, particularly Lifton on totalism, Lalich on bounded choice, and Wessinger on authoritarian religious structure, the paper identifies the patterns by which movements enforcing hierarchical authority, patriarchal control, and emotional detachment redefine belonging as loyalty to power rather than as shared identity grounded in the *imago Dei*. Within such systems, empathy is pathologized as weakness, dissent recoded as rebellion, and membership rendered conditional and coercive. Theological anthropology supplies the normative critique NRM analysis alone cannot: belonging cannot be sustained within systems built on fear and domination, for such systems violate the covenantal structure of human personhood before God. A constructive vision closes the paper, grounded in moral attention to the other and covenantal personhood disclosed in Christ, the true image of God.

Key words: empathy, belonging, high-control religion, totalism, bounded choice, charisma, imago Dei, Edith Stein, theological anthropology, lament

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Introduction: The Price of Admission

In August of 1916 a young phenomenologist defended at Freiburg a dissertation arguing that empathy is the act by which one consciousness grasps another consciousness at all.[1] Edith Stein treated *Einfühlung* as a structure of cognition, the basic form in which other-minded beings are given, and she took great pains to distinguish it from the fusion of feeling in which one self dissolves into another. Twenty-six years later she was murdered at Auschwitz, inside a political order that had perfected both halves of the distinction she drew: a people fused into a single will, and a category of neighbors whom that people had been trained to stop perceiving.[2] These two achievements were really one amazing finding; the fusion required the blindness, and the blindness secured the fusion.

This paper holds that the same pairing, at a far smaller scale and with no comparable violence, organizes belonging in high-control Christian communities, and that one such community has now published its theory of the matter; likewise, this theory has reached beyond the bounds of the community into the politics of a nation. Joe Rigney's *The Sin of Empathy* argues that empathy is a sin, a solvent of conviction and a lever of manipulation, and that the faithful leader is the one who resists emotional identification with those who suffer.[3] The book comes from the network that has formed around Douglas

[1] On the biographical contour, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Stein passed her doctoral examination under Husserl at Freiburg *summa cum laude* in the summer of 1916; the phenomenological portion of the thesis appeared as *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (Halle, 1917). On her appointment as Husserl's assistant, see Dermot Moran, "Edith Stein," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published March 18, 2020, substantive revision May 8, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stein/.

[2] Stein entered the Discalced Carmelite convent at Cologne in 1933, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Arrested at the Carmel in Echt, the Netherlands, on 2 August 1942, she was deported and killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 9 August 1942. See Waltraut Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, trans. Bernard Bonowitz, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

[3] Joe Rigney, *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2025).

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Wilson in Moscow, Idaho: a congregation, a denomination, a college, and a publishing house whose promotional copy introduces its subject as "the greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century."[4] For most of its history that network stood at the very edge of American evangelicalism in the far-right corner. Now, it has moved beyond those bounds. During 2025, its positions on household voting and the civic standing of women received sustained national coverage, in part because the sitting Secretary of Defense, who worships in an affiliated congregation, reposted that coverage to his own audience, and a companion volume from a commercial press carried the same thesis to a mass readership in partisan form.[5] A community's theory of feeling has become a contribution to public argument about who deserves compassion, at all.

The academic temptation is to treat *The Sin of Empathy* as an entry in an intramural evangelical dispute over a word. The argument here treats it as something more useful: a primary source in which a high-control community states, with unusual candor, the rule of feeling on which its form of belonging depends. Read beside the scholarship on new and high-demand religions, the book's prescriptions show themselves as familiar. Robert Jay Lifton's themes of ideological totalism, Janja Lalich's account of

[4] Canon Press, product page for Rigney, *The Sin of Empathy*, release date February 18, 2025: "Meet Empathy. The greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century." Rigney is Fellow of Theology at New Saint Andrews College and an associate pastor of Christ Church. On the network itself (Christ Church, the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, New Saint Andrews College, and Canon Press), see Crawford Gribben, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[5] Julia Simon, "Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth Reposts Video of Pastors Saying Women Shouldn't Vote," NPR, August 9, 2025; Tiffany Stanley and Peter Smith, "What to Know About the Archconservative Church Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth Attends," Associated Press, in PBS NewsHour, August 12, 2025; David French, "Why a 'Paleo-Confederate' Pastor Is on the Rise," *New York Times*, August 14, 2025. The Associated Press reports that the Secretary belongs to a congregation of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches near Nashville and that he reposted the CNN segment on Wilson under the caption "All of Christ for All of Life." For Wilson's own account of the coverage, see Douglas Wilson, "That CNN Report: Viewing the Game Film," *Blog & Mablog*, August 11, 2025. The companion volume is Allie Beth Stuckey, *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion* (New York: Sentinel, 2024). The mainstreaming is documented here, not predicted; no inevitable terminus is claimed.

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bounded choice within a self-sealing system, and Catherine Wessinger's analysis of how charismatic authority is conferred and how far it may extend together describe the mechanism the book recommends.[6] That scholarship can show how such belonging is built. It cannot say what belonging is for, or why a community that purchases cohesion with the perception of its wounded has done wrong and has done more than reorganize itself. Theological anthropology can. If human beings bear the image of God as an office conferred before any loyalty is rendered, then belonging is given with the image, and a community that makes it a wage has taken to itself a prerogative that was never its own.

The argument here has seven steps. The first defines "high-control" by practices and declines the vocabulary of "cult," a discipline this audience has every right to demand. The second reads Rigney's text as a rule of feeling. The third sets that rule beside Lifton, Lalich, and Wessinger. The fourth turns to Stein for the distinction that exposes the paradox of the title: a community that condemns fusion in the name of clarity while requiring fusion with its own center, and that forbids the one act by which a member could be perceived as a person. The fifth supplies the normative critique from the *imago Dei*, from the law of the stranger, and from Paul's account of membership. The sixth hears witnesses beyond the church, among them the African philosophy of ubuntu and the Islamic teaching on *fiṭra* and *raḥma*, with the cautions each tradition raises against itself. The final step reconstructs belonging as moral attention and covenantal responsibility disclosed in Christ, and closes with practices that any spiritual community,

[6] Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961; repr. with a new preface, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), ProQuest Ebook Central, whose pagination is followed throughout; Janja Lalich, *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

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traditional or new, might test itself against. This paper extends two earlier arguments, one philosophical and one pastoral, and owes its cases to the second.[7]

Naming the Object: "High-Control" Without "Cult"

A paper delivered under the auspices of a program founded to welcome scholars of small, new, and stigmatized traditions must also disclose what it declines to say. It does not call the community under study a cult. Wessinger's judgment on that word is harsh and also correct; using the word cult "dehumanizes the religion's members and their children," and it "represents an oversimplified and bigoted stereotype that is applied to numerous diverse religions."[8] James Richardson traced how the term migrated from a technical sociological category to a popular pejorative and urged scholars to abandon it, and Eileen Barker's study of the Unification Church demonstrated long ago that the image of irresistible recruitment, on which so much anticult polemic rested, did not survive contact with the evidence; most who attended the movement's workshops never joined, and most who joined did not stay.[9] The most recent restatement of the objection, by Erin Sessions and Bernard Doherty, warns that the language of "control" now returning to public discourse is often as thin as the brainwashing rhetoric it replaces, and

[7] Dawn Lewis Sutherland, "Empathy as *Imago Dei*: Moral Perception, Alterity, and the Rehabilitation of a Disparaged Virtue in Evangelical Ethics" (paper presented at the Tyndale Fellowship Philosophy of Religion Study Group, High Leigh, UK, July 1, 2026); Sutherland, *The Truth About Empathy: How the Bible Calls Us to Compassion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2027). The first supplies the phenomenological argument condensed in the fourth section below; the second supplies the exegesis and the cases.

[8] Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 4.

[9] James T. Richardson, "Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34 (1993): 348–56; Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). For a history of the division between NRM studies and "cultic studies," see W. Michael Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements* (London: Routledge, 2018).

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that it helps neither those harmed in particular new religions nor those harmed, as the authors are careful to add, within mainstream religion.[10]

That last concession is the opening this argument really needs. Harm in religious settings follows practices, and the practices observe no boundary between the novel and the established, the marginal and the powerful. The term "high-control" is, therefore, used here in a restricted sense, defined by what a community does and indifferent to what it believes, how old it is, or how many it numbers. Four descriptions derived from mainstream sociology, each of which predates or stands outside the "cult wars," fix the usage, even in its popular sense. Lewis Coser called "greedy" those institutions that "seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and . . . attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries."[11] Rosabeth Moss Kanter identified the mechanisms by which communal groups generate commitment, among them *renunciation*, the surrender of outside attachments, and *mortification*, the stripping of the private self before the group.[12] Arlie Hochschild showed that every social setting carries "feeling rules," which she described as "the side of ideology that deals with emotion and feeling," and that members labor to bring what they feel into line with what the setting says they ought to feel.[13] Benjamin Zablocki, wishing to move the brainwashing

[10] Erin Martine Sessions and Bernard Doherty, "'Cults,' Coercion, and Control: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Return of 'Brainwashing'?," *Implicit Religion* 24, no. 2 (2023): 161–94.

[11] Lewis A. Coser, *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 4, as quoted in Marshall W. Meyer, review of *Greedy Institutions*, by Lewis A. Coser, *American Journal of Sociology* 80, no. 6 (1975): 1495–96, at 1495.

[12] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). Kanter's six mechanisms are sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification, and transcendence.

[13] Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–75, at 551. For the extension of the concept to religious "emotional regimes," see Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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debate onto measurable ground, proposed that scholars ask what it costs to leave: a community may recruit without coercion and still hold its members by making exit ruinous.[14]

A high-control community, on this usage, is one in which loyalty is exclusive, feeling is regulated by rule, dissent is classified as defect, and departure is priced beyond what most members can pay. Nothing in the definition turns on doctrine. A congregation that confesses the Nicene Creed may satisfy it, and a new religious movement with startling beliefs may not. Lifton, whose categories the third section will use, insisted on the same discipline. "No milieu ever achieves complete totalism," he wrote, "and many relatively moderate environments show some signs of it"; any particular religious environment, he added, "must be judged according to its own characteristics."[15]

Two further cautions belong here, in this description. The first concerns evidence. The principal academic study of the Moscow community, Crawford Gribben's *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America*, is a descriptive social history of theological ideas, built on years of fieldwork, and its author states that he has "not felt required to take positions on the controversies about theology, plagiarism, and pastoral care" that surround his subjects.[16] Gribben does not characterize the community as authoritarian or high-control, and this paper does not enlist him for that claim. No peer-reviewed study known yet to this author has analyzed the network in the categories of NRM scholarship, which is one reason for attempting the exercise. The analysis that follows rests on a narrower and firmer baseline: the

[14] Benjamin D. Zablocki, "Exit Cost Analysis: A New Approach to the Scientific Study of Brainwashing," *Nova Religio* 1, no. 2 (1998): 216–49. The volume Zablocki edited with Thomas Robbins, *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), deliberately sets scholars from both sides of the dispute in one binding.

[15] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 417, 438.

[16] Gribben, *Survival and Resistance*, 12. Gribben describes his method as a social history of theological ideas that draws on ethnographic and literary-critical approaches.

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community's own published prescription for the emotional life of its members, read as a text. The second caution concerns direction. The scholarship on new religions has usually had to defend small groups against the suspicion of the powerful. Here, however, the direction of scrutiny is reversed. A theory of feeling formed in a small and disciplined community is being offered to a national movement as a program, and the people it teaches that movement to stop perceiving are, for the most part, the ones this conference was convened to welcome.

A Rule of Feeling: The Anti-Empathy Text as Primary Source

Any fair reading begins by presenting the argument at its strongest. Rigney builds a moral distinction on the contrast between sympathy and empathy, glossing the first as suffering *with* another and the second as suffering *in* another, an inward absorption that relocates the agent inside the sufferer's standpoint and so forfeits the vantage from which truth can be told.[17] Because empathy, so defined, removes the leverage required to contradict the sufferer's perspective, a community "in the grip of empathy" will be marked, he concludes, by "cowardice, indifference, and cruelty."[18] The secular companion to the argument is Paul Bloom's, which holds on cognitive-scientific grounds that empathy is "a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now," intense, narrow, and innumerate, and that a cooler "rational compassion" should replace it.[19] Rigney borrows the diagnosis and declines the therapy. His remedy comes from Edwin Friedman's family-systems theory of leadership: the "self-

[17] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 16. The distinction rests on English etymology; the Greek of Heb 4:15, *sympathēsai* (συμπαθῆσαι), knows no such contrast, and the Hebrew vocabulary of compassion, treated below, knows it still less.

[18] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 45.

[19] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 31; for the definition of empathy as feeling what one takes another to feel, see 16. Bloom's "rational compassion" remains a form of other-directed care, which the theological appropriation of his argument tends to treat with suspicion.

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differentiated" leader who remains calm, defines himself, and refuses to be drawn into the reactivity of an anxious group.[20]

Rigney identifies a genuine danger, and any serious account must reckon with it. Feelings can certainly be weaponized. Abusers can trade on the tenderness of congregations to escape accountability; victims can be pressured into silence by appeals to a fellow-feeling that has slipped its moorings; a pastor meets the demand that to *feel-with* is to capitulate. The question is what the text does with that danger, and here, any reader trained in the sociology of religious emotion will recognize the genre. *The Sin of Empathy* is a manual of feeling rules. It tells a community what its members ought not to feel, toward whom, and what the forbidden feeling signifies when it appears.

Three of its arguments deserve isolation in order to understand them more fully. The first is a vocabulary. Compassion that answers to the leader's judgment is "tethered"; compassion that answers to the sufferer is "untethered," and at the limit becomes, in a phrase Rigney adopts, a "man-eating weed."[21] A person who says that a community's conduct has hurt him or her may be engaged in "emotional blackmail," and in the text's most emotionally-charged example, the parents are told that they must choose between a "dead son or live daughter;" this is offered as the paradigm of the type.[22] The example works precisely because the manipulation does not cancel the anguish, nor does the anguish cancel the manipulation. The category it licenses, though, is much broader than the example. Once the report of

[20] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 55–58, drawing on Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th anniversary rev. ed., ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal (New York: Church Publishing, 2017). Friedman's concern is the anxious system; his model has therapeutic uses within family systems theory and makes no claim to be a doctrine of holiness.

[21] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 70; on "tethered" compassion, 141–91.

[22] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 57–58.

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pain can be classified in advance as a tactic, anyone who says "I have been hurt" may be heard as a threat to authority before a single fact is examined.

The second mechanism is a sociology. Rigney describes the pressure on leaders as coming from three groups: "Victims or oppressed groups (the objects of empathy), Advocates (the arbiters of justice), and other Respectable Christians (the purveyors of credibility)."[23] Under the heading of the "progressive gaze," the three form a single apparatus whose disapproval tempts leaders to soften their convictions. The schema has an evident function; it converts testimony into leverage, the one who interprets testimony into an operative, and the hearer moved by testimony into a collaborator. What does this do in practicality? No position remains from which a wounded person can speak and be received as a witness to something that happened.

The third component is a gendered anthropology. In the chapter titled "Feminism: Queen of the Woke," a dispute at a single Anglican conference becomes the template for a general theory: women are more empathetic, empathy is unstable, and the instability explains doctrinal drift, institutional capture, and at last what the chapter calls "pathological feminine empathy" as a cause of civilizational decline.[24] The author's longer study of this chapter observes that its reasoning is sealed against disconfirmation. Objection to the speaker is evidence of empathy; empathy is evidence of feminism; feminism is evidence

[23] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 71–108; cf. Joe Rigney, "Living Under the Progressive Gaze," *WORLD*, January 31, 2024. The quoted sentence stands at 84.

[24] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 109–28; "pathological feminine empathy" at 120–28. The anthropology is introduced through a block quotation from Calvin Robinson's Mere Anglicanism address (111), which Rigney presents as an able description of "the social dynamics in play": women "tend to be more theologically flexible" because "men do not have the emotional intelligence of women," and women are "more empathetic and tend to be more emotion-based when solving problems." Rigney then adopts the claim in his own voice: "To expand on Robinson's point, he is correct that, in general, women are more empathetic than men." The words at 111 are Robinson's, endorsed and extended by Rigney; the page is derived from the Kindle pagination of the copy in the author's archive.

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of manipulation; and every piece of counterevidence is absorbed into the diagnosis it was offered to test.[25] The capacity by which suffering is perceived has been assigned to one half of the community and then defined as that half's characteristic defect.

These three dynamics converge in the cases the author has recorded from congregations where this teaching, or the temperament it systematizes, held sway. An elder who asked for an outside investigator after a mother reported a volunteer's conduct toward her daughter was told that he had become "divisive" and was "being influenced by a secular victim mentality"; the word "empathy" entered the conversation as a diagnosis, and he was removed from every decision touching the case. A deacon's wife who organized meals for the children of a man facing fraud charges saw the effort canceled after the pastor, citing Rigney's framework by name, warned the board against "empathy-driven responses." A staff meeting received the news that a volunteer had reported deep discomfort after being found alone with a male leader; someone said, "She's made comments like that before," shoulders relaxed around the table, and the meeting turned to planning Easter. The leader stayed. The volunteer, the room was told, would not be returning.[26] In none of these rooms did anyone decide to be cruel. Each room applied a rule about what a responsible Christian may allow himself to feel, and the rule did its work.

Totalism, Bounded Choice, and Conferred Charisma

Lifton: The Themes of Ideological Totalism

Lifton's study of Chinese thought reform closed with a chapter that has outlived its occasion. It proposed eight psychological themes by which any environment might be assessed for what he called

[25] Sutherland, *Truth About Empathy*, chap. 5.

[26] Sutherland, *Truth About Empathy*, chaps. 4–5. Names and identifying details are altered there; the events are reported as the author witnessed them or received them from the persons concerned.

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ideological totalism, and he was explicit that the themes describe a direction in which "any ideology" may be carried, "whether religious, political, or scientific."[27] In the preface he wrote for the 1989 reprint, he described the book as less a record of Maoist China than an exploration of "the quest for absolute or 'totalistic' belief systems," and he observed, a generation before the present case, that most of the themes "can be found somewhere in the Judeo-Christian tradition."[28] Four of the eight are especially relevant to the anti-empathy rule of feeling.

Demand for purity. The totalist environment divides experience into the pure and the impure, and "nothing human is immune from the flood of stern moral judgments." The division produces what Lifton called a guilty milieu and a shaming milieu, in which guilt and shame become "preferred forms of communication" and leaders become "the arbiters of existential guilt, authorities without limit in dealing with others' limitations."[29] The anti-empathy teaching extends the demand to a new object. Older rigorisms policed belief and conduct. This one polices a perception. The member who finds herself moved by another's pain has discovered an impurity in herself, and the member who reports her own pain has introduced one into the body. A wounded person formed by this teaching learns to read her perception of harm as the vice that disqualifies her testimony.

[27] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 402. The eight themes, treated at 402–17, are milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for purity, the cult of confession, the "sacred science," loading the language, doctrine over person, and the dispensing of existence.

[28] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, preface to the 1989 edition, 8; for the remark on the Judeo-Christian tradition, 435. At 437 Lifton lists the marks by which religious totalism may be recognized: "exaggerated control and manipulation of the individual, the blanketing of the milieu with guilt and shame, the emphasis upon man's hopeless depravity and worthlessness, and upon his need to submit abjectly to a vengeful deity," all "within the framework of an exclusive and closed system of ultimate truth." He contrasts these with religious settings of "faith and commitment without the need for either self-negation or condemnation of nonbelievers" (437–38).

[29] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 406–7.

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Loading the language. "The language of the totalist environment," Lifton wrote, "is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed."[30] The vocabulary surveyed in the previous section functions in exactly this way. "Untethered empathy," "emotional blackmail," "the progressive gaze," "victim mentality," "divisive": each phrase ends an inquiry at the moment it should begin. The elder who requested an outside investigator received no argument in reply. He received a term, and the term did the work an argument would have had to do. Lifton cited Edward Sapir on the social use of such speech, "'He talks like us' is equivalent to saying 'He is one of us,'" and the converse holds with equal force.[31] The member who cannot bring herself to use the vocabulary about her own injury has marked herself as one who does not belong.

Doctrine over person: "the subordination of human experience to the claims of doctrine," visible in a continual shift between experience and its abstract interpretation, between what Lifton called "genuine feelings and spurious cataloguing of feelings."[32] No phrase in the literature describes the conference room more exactly. A woman reports that she felt unsafe. The report is received, catalogued ("comments like that"), and filed. The underlying assumption, in Lifton's words, is that the doctrine "is ultimately more valid, true, and real than is any aspect of actual human character or human experience," so that where experience and doctrine conflict, "the will to orthodoxy requires … that men be modified in order to reaffirm the myth."[33] Rigney's schema of Victims, Advocates, and Respectables is an

[30] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 411.

[31] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 412.

[32] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 413.

[33] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 414. Lifton credits the phrase "will to orthodoxy" to Benjamin Schwartz.

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instrument for this cataloguing. It supplies in advance the box into which any inconvenient experience may be placed.

Finally, *dispensing of existence*. "The totalist environment draws a sharp line between those whose right to existence can be recognized, and those who possess no such right." Within such an environment a person finds confirmation "not in his individual relationships, but only from the fount of all existence, the totalist Organization," so that existence comes to depend "upon creed (I believe, therefore I am), upon submission (I obey, therefore I am) and beyond these, upon a sense of total merger with the ideological movement."[34] Translated into the modest scale of congregational life, the dispensing of existence is the dispensing of belonging. The volunteer who "would not be returning," the employee dismissed a week after confiding that her marriage had become unendurable, the young man removed from every ministry within days of disclosing his distress: each learned that membership had been a conditional grant, revocable when the member's reality became a cost to the center.[35] Lifton's phrase for what remains when the conditions are met deserves to be kept in view for the next section. He called it *merger*, and in his account of the cult of confession he described "the dissolution of self into the great flow of the Movement."[36]

Lalich: The Self-Sealing System

Lalich's contribution is to explain why intelligent and idealistic people remain. Her comparative study of Heaven's Gate and the Democratic Workers Party, one religious group and one political,

[34] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 415–17.

[35] Sutherland, *Truth About Empathy*, chaps. 2 and 4.

[36] Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 408, 417.

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identified four interlocking dimensions of a closed social structure: charismatic authority, a transcendent belief system, systems of control, and systems of influence. Where the four interlock they form what she calls a self-sealing system, "closed in on itself and closed to the outside world," structured so that "everything reinforces the system."[37] Within it the devoted member arrives at the condition that gives her book its title. Bounded choice is a state in which a person makes decisions that appear irrational to outsiders and that are, within the limits the system has drawn around perception, entirely coherent. The member's freedom is real. Its range has been fixed in advance, and at the extreme, in her words, "life outside the cult has become impossible to imagine."[38]

Two features of the model illuminate what is going on today. The first is the sealing itself. The reasoning of Rigney's chapter on feminism, in which every objection confirms the diagnosis, is a system closed to disconfirming evidence in miniature, and the gaze schema extends the seal to persons: whoever brings contrary evidence has been classified beforehand as victim, advocate, or seeker of respectability. A member who accepts the schema cannot be reached by the testimony of the wounded, because the schema has told him what that testimony is before he hears it. His choices remain his own. They are bounded by a teaching that has removed from his field of vision the one class of facts that could have changed them.

[37] Lalich, *Bounded Choice*, 2–22 and 222–63; the "self-sealing system" is developed at 232–60. The compressed definitions quoted here are from Janja Lalich, "Using the Bounded Choice Model as an Analytical Tool: A Case Study of Heaven's Gate" (paper presented at the American Family Foundation conference, Edmonton, AB, June 12, 2004), which restates the model of *Bounded Choice*.

[38] Lalich, *Bounded Choice*, 251–52. Lalich observes of Heaven's Gate and the Democratic Workers Party alike that "the boundaries of knowledge were shut tight and reinforced in three specific ways: through the process of resocialization, through the use of ideology, and through social controls."

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The second feature is announced in the title of Lalich's tenth chapter, "The True Believer: The Fusion of Personal Freedom and Self-Renunciation."[39] Her true believer experiences the surrender of the self as its fulfillment. The idealism is sincere and the fusion is welcomed, which is why accounts of such communities that picture their members as dupes or captives fail to describe anyone who has lived in one. The men around the conference table were neither. They had renounced something they had been taught to regard as a weakness, and they experienced the renunciation as maturity.

Wessinger: Charisma from Below

Wessinger must be used with caution and care, since her work is a standing rebuke to the careless use of everything in this section. Her subject is millennialism and the conditions under which millennial groups turn to violence or have violence turned upon them, and her consistent counsel is restraint: scholars, she writes, "should be leary of labeling a group as potentially dangerous," given how readily such labels escalate opposition to unconventional believers.[40] This paper makes no claim that the community under study is dangerous in her sense; its claim is that her analysis of authority exposes something the other two accounts leave implicit.

Charisma, for Wessinger, is attributed. It refers to "a characteristic attributed by believers to an individual, scripture, place, or other social construct"; the belief is that the leader "has access to an unseen source of authority."[41] It follows that "a charismatic leader can exercise control over people only to the

[39] Lalich, *Bounded Choice*, 221–46; at 14 Lalich stresses that such groups "have attracted not the lonely and lost, but rather the idealistic and lofty minded, the curious and well educated."

[40] Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 26 (spelling original).

[41] Catherine Wessinger, "Charismatic Leaders in New Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–96, at 80.

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extent that followers permit and implement that control," and that "the agency, free will, and judgment of the believers are crucial in determining whether a charismatic leader has the scope to develop totalitarian control over followers."[42] Authoritarian religious structure, on this account, is built from below. It extends as far as the judgment of ordinary members allows and no farther. Wessinger adds a second element that bears on the case: the radical dualism of a worldview in which the world is "a battleground between good and evil, God and Satan, us and them," which her survey of the field lists, together with charismatic authority and totalistic organization, among the internal factors that make a group fragile.[43]

Set beside that analysis, the function of an anti-empathy doctrine comes into focus. If the members' judgment is the check on authority, then a teaching that instructs members to distrust their perception of another's suffering removes the check at its source. A congregation does not need to be coerced into permitting the mistreatment of one of its own if it has been taught that the impulse to object is a sin. Here the account corrects a common picture of authoritarian religion, in which a leader seizes power over an unwilling people. Wessinger's believers confer authority freely. What the rule of feeling alters is the information on which they confer it. The dualism does the remaining work. Once "the progressive gaze" names a hostile world pressing in on the faithful, the wounded member who speaks has been assigned, without anyone having to say so, to the other side of the line.

[42] Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 8.

[43] Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 17; Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8–9, where the three factors are reported from Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony. Wessinger treats these as predisposing factors for fragility and violence in millennial groups; the present paper borrows the structural observation and makes no claim about violence.

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Taken together, the three accounts describe a single mechanism from three sides. Lifton describes the environment, Lalich the enclosure of choice within it, and Wessinger the consent on which its authority depends. In each, the regulation of feeling bears the weight. The guilty milieu makes perception an impurity; the sealed system makes the testimony of the wounded inadmissible; the disabled judgment of members lets authority expand unchecked. Belonging, within such a system, has been redefined. It no longer names a shared identity. It names a standing, maintained by loyalty to the center and forfeited by the act of seeing what the center prefers unseen.

The Paradox of Belonging: *Einfühlung* and *Einsfühlung*

The sociological accounts leave a puzzle, and the puzzle is the paradox in this paper's title. The anti-empathy teaching presents itself as a defense of the differentiated self against fusion. Friedman's leader resists being absorbed into the emotional field of the group, and Rigney's objection to empathy is that it dissolves the boundary between helper and sufferer. Yet Lifton's totalist environment ends in "total merger," and Lalich's true believer is defined by a fusion of freedom and self-renunciation. A doctrine that condemns fusion turns out to organize communities of the fused. The phenomenology of empathy that Stein developed a century ago explains how both can be true, and the German vocabulary makes visible a distinction that English conceals.

Stein's inquiry began within Husserl's analysis of intersubjectivity and broke with it at a decisive point. Husserl had shown that the other is given to consciousness non-originarily: "neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his

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own essence, becomes given in our experience originally."[44] The inaccessibility is no defect. It is the condition of there being another at all, since an experience given to me as my own is given would be a moment of my own life. Stein kept the structural insight while refusing the idealism that threatened to make the other a product of the ego's synthesizing activity. For her the foreign experience is encountered, given as already there and as not mine.[45] She defined empathy as "the experience of foreign consciousness in general," a *sui generis* act irreducible to perception, memory, imagination, or inference, and she described its doubleness with a precision later accounts have seldom matched: "In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience."[46] I genuinely apprehend the other's grief, and what I apprehend is given throughout as hers.

The point on which everything turns is Stein's criticism of Theodor Lipps, whose theory of empathy as inner imitation threatened to collapse the empathizer into the empathized. To follow another's experience through is to be, in her phrase, "at the foreign I"; it is never to be one with it. She therefore distinguished empathy (*Einfühlung*) sharply from affective unification (*Einsfühlung*, feeling-one-with),

[44] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), §52; for appresentation, analogical apperception, and pairing, see §§50–54.

[45] The charge that the Fifth Meditation constitutes the other it claims to secure was pressed by Levinas and at length by Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), pt. 1. Jacques Derrida defended Husserl's appresentation against Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153. Stein's realist correction sidesteps the dispute: the mechanism is Husserl's, and the metaphysics that lets it bear a genuine other is hers.

[46] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed., Collected Works of Edith Stein 3 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 11. On the three moments of the empathic act (the emergence of the experience, its fulfilling explication, and its comprehensive objectification), see 10; on the contemporary recovery of her analysis, Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 6–8.

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from emotional contagion, and from fellow-feeling, and Max Scheler's taxonomy of sympathy drew the same lines.[47] Where the self is dissolved, the act has failed. Where the self remains alongside the other and the other remains other, the act is empathy. The structural mark is non-appropriation: the neighbor's grief is presented to me, not produced in me, and it leads me without becoming mine.

Two results follow for the present argument. The first is critical. The vices the anti-empathy teaching ascribes to empathy (loss of judgment, vulnerability to manipulation, collapse of the self into the sufferer) belong to *Einsfühlung*. The critics have indicted feeling-one-with and convicted the disciplined perception of the other as other. The second result is diagnostic, and it resolves the paradox. A high-control community does not abolish fusion. It redirects it. Members are to feel what the center feels: to share its alarms, adopt its enemies, experience a threat to the institution's reputation as a threat to themselves, and close ranks around its calm. Such oneness is affective unification in Stein's exact sense, and Lifton and Lalich each found it at the terminus of totalist commitment. What the community forbids is the other act, the one in which a member stands at the foreign I of a wounded person and apprehends her experience as hers. That act is dangerous to the center for a simple reason. It is the only act in which the wounded person appears as a person, with a reality of her own that the community's account of itself must now accommodate.

So, the price of admission comes into view, and it is paid twice. The member surrenders her own perception of others, since seeing the wounded is classified as sin. She also forfeits being perceived, since no one around her is permitted the act by which she could be apprehended as other than a function of the

[47] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 16–17, 34; see also 13–14. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), separates genuine fellow-feeling (*Mitgefühl*) both from emotional infection (*Gefühlsansteckung*) and from identification (*Einsfühlung*).

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community's self-understanding. A community of this kind can be warm, generous, and intensely bonded. Its members may speak of it as family, and mean it. What they have is unification, and what they lack is belonging, because belonging requires that someone be there to belong: a self who is seen as herself and received as such. Fusion offers absorption in place of recognition. The test arrives on the day a member's experience diverges from the center's account, and she learns whether she was loved or only included in a feeling.

Levinas named what the forbidden act discloses. The face is "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me"; it addresses before it is analyzed, and the first word of its address is a summons to responsibility that precedes any decision to assume it.[48] Levinas distrusted the vocabulary of empathy, which he associated with the reduction of the other to an analogue of the self, and he is enlisted here only for the priority of the claim. Stein's non-appropriative act is the perception in which that claim is registered without the reduction he feared. His account also answers Bloom's strongest objection. The face is never encountered alone; the third party (*le tiers*) is always already present, and with the third come comparison, measure, and the demand for justice.[49] Ordered empathy is therefore not condemned to the spotlight. The remedy for a narrow compassion is a perception disciplined by justice, which holds the sufferer who is seen and the sufferer beyond the sightline within a single field. The anti-empathy teaching proposes the opposite remedy. It would correct a narrow vision by closing the eyes.

[48] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50; on the face as discourse, 66; on the priority of ethics to ontology, 42–48.

[49] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), where the entry of the third gives rise to comparison, measure, and justice.

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What the Sociology Cannot Say: The Image, the Stranger, and the Body

Lifton, Lalich, and Wessinger describe. Their descriptions carry an evident moral charge, yet none of the three can state, from within the method each employs, what makes a sealed and merging community a wrong done to its members and not simply one more way of organizing human life. A sociologist may observe that exit costs are high. Whether high exit costs violate anything depends on what a person is and what belonging is for, and those are questions for an anthropology. The Christian communities in view confess one. The critique that follows judges them by the Scriptures they hold to be authoritative, which is the only critique they are bound to hear and the one this author is competent to make.

The Image as Office

Genesis presents the image of God as a calling. "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness," and the verses that follow specify the likeness as representation and rule (Gen 1:26–28). In the ancient Near Eastern world the *tselem* (צֶלֶם) of a king was the image set up in a territory to make the absent sovereign present and to exercise his authority there; Genesis assigns that royal office to humankind as such, male and female, without remainder.[50] The image is a vocation of representation before it is a possession of faculties. The relational reading developed by Barth, Grenz, and Zizioulas deepens the point: the God whom the image represents is communion, and the human being corresponds to that God as one who exists with and for another.[51] Empathy belongs to the image as the proper exercise

[50] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), on the royal-functional and representational sense of *tselem* against its ancient Near Eastern background. Scripture quotations follow the NRSVue unless otherwise noted.

[51] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), §45, "The Basic Form of Humanity"; Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the* Imago Dei

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of the office, the perceptual and affective operation of a creature made to apprehend the neighbor as other and to move toward her.

Two consequences follow for belonging. The first is that the image is no competence. John Kilner has pressed the worry that relational accounts make dignity contingent on actual relating and so endanger those whose capacities are impaired, and the worry deserves honor.[52] A vocational reading meets it. An office is not forfeited by impairment of the capacities through which it is exercised, any more than an ambassador ceases to be an ambassador when he sleeps; the image is the office, and empathy is the office discharged. The second consequence is the one on which this paper's critique rests. If the image is conferred by God in the act of creation, then each person's standing among other persons is conferred with it. Belonging to the human community precedes every loyalty a community may ask, because it rests on a commission no community issued. A congregation may order its common life, discipline real wrongs, and define the terms of office within it. What it may not do is make the recognition of a member as a person depend on her usefulness to its account of itself. Lifton's phrase returns with theological force. To dispense existence is to take to oneself a prerogative that Genesis reserves to the Creator, and a community that does so has moved, in the vocabulary of the author's earlier work, from *eikōn* (εἰκών) to *eidōlon* (εἴδωλον): from an image that opens toward its source to one that has closed upon itself.[53]

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[52] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

[53] Dawn Lewis Sutherland, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of* Imago Dei (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025); Sutherland, "Tech Beyond Its Maker: AI, Idolatry, and the Inversion of Human Agency" (paper presented at the Koinonia Forum, Princeton Theological Seminary, March 7, 2026).

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Scripture names what such a community comes to resemble. "Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them" (Ps 115:8): the idol has eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, and its worshipers acquire its properties.[54] Isaiah's satire of the craftsman who carves a god from the same log that warms his supper (Isa 44:9–20) exposes what the idol is for. It is a managed presence, a deity who will never contradict the one who made it. The differentiated leader of the anti-empathy literature, admired because nothing appears to touch him, performs the same function in a community's imagination. He is an image of invulnerability, and those who look to him learn, as the psalm predicts, his principal attribute. Paul's word for the result is very precise. Those darkened in understanding have "lost all sensitivity" (Eph 4:19), *apēlgēkotes* (ἀπηλγηκότες), from a verb that means to cease to feel pain, to become callous.[55] Ezekiel's promise addresses the same condition from the side of grace: "I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:26). The prophet does not treat the capacity to be moved as the disease. It is what the Spirit restores.

"You Know the Heart of a Stranger"

The law of Israel grounds its ethic of belonging in an act of empathic knowledge. "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9). The Hebrew is stronger than most translations convey: *wəʾattem yədaʿtem ʾet-nepeš haggēr* (וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר), you yourselves know the *nepeš*, the very life, of the stranger. The command presupposes that Israel can know from within what it is to be the one outside, and it makes that knowledge

[54] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16–18, 22–24; see also Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[55] Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἀπαλγέω.

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the ground of the stranger's protection. Leviticus draws the conclusion: the alien "shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself" (Lev 19:34). Deuteronomy roots the command in the character of God, who "loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut 10:18–19).

There are three features of this legislation that are especially important for the argument. The knowledge it commands is non-appropriative in exactly Stein's sense. Israel knows the stranger's *nepeš* through the memory of its own bondage, yet the stranger remains a stranger, a *gēr* with a life of his own, and is never absorbed into Israel's story as a figure in it. Likewise, the law treats this knowledge as the safeguard of justice. The anti-empathy teaching holds that entering another's experience compromises judgment. Torah holds that a community which has forgotten what it is to be the outsider will oppress him, and that remembered fellow-feeling is what keeps its courts honest. Finally, the law establishes belonging prior to merit. The stranger has rendered Israel no loyalty. His place is secured by who God is and by what Israel remembers.

The vocabulary of divine compassion runs along the same line. The Hebrew verb *raḥam* (רָחַם), to show compassion (regularly in the Piel, *riḥam*), and the noun *raḥămîm* (רַחֲמִים) derive from *reḥem* (רֶחֶם), "womb." The lexica connect the abstract noun to the feeling proper to those born of one womb, or to the mother's feeling for the child of her own; on either derivation, compassion is the affection that belongs to a bond one did not earn.[56] When Isaiah asks, "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show

[56] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), s.v. רַחֲמִים, which takes the noun as denominative from רֶחֶם and glosses its original sense as the brotherly feeling "of those born from same womb," while noting the alternative of motherly feeling; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1190–91, s.v. רחם. The classic literary treatment is Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*

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no compassion for the child of her womb?" (Isa 49:15), and when the psalmist writes that "as a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him" (Ps 103:13), the point is not divine sentiment. Compassion in this idiom is what kinship feels like from the inside. To withhold it is to deny the kinship.

Membership as Co-Suffering

The New Testament's most developed account of belonging is Paul's figure of the body, and its logic runs directly against the dispensing of existence. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor 12:21). The members that seem weaker are "indispensable" (*anankaia*, v. 22), and God has so arranged the body as to give "the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (vv. 24–25). Then comes the definition: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (v. 26). The verb is *sympaschei* (συμπάσχει), cognate with the *sympathēsai* (συμπαθῆσαι) that Hebrews predicates of Christ, the high priest who is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb 4:15). Paul does not list co-suffering among the duties that members owe once membership has been established. He offers it as the mark by which a body can be told from a collection. A community in which the pain of one member is not felt by the others, where it is filed, managed, or classified as a threat, has ceased on Paul's definition to be a body, whatever its doctrinal statement says.

This is why the withholding of empathy is more than callousness. It is sin, and a sin that strikes at the recognition of the other as a bearer of God's image. The neighbor may be wronged not only by

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), chap. 2, "Journey of a Metaphor." In Isa 49:15 the root appears in the verb (*mēraḥēm*); the noun rendered "womb" in that verse is *beṭen*.

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injury inflicted, but by mercy withheld. Scripture does not confine sin to the wrong we do; it also names the good we withhold. The priest and the Levite in Jesus's parable commit no act against the wounded man; Luke's verb is *antiparēlthen* (ἀντιπαρῆλθεν), each "passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:31–32), a compound that conveys deliberate distance. The accused in Matthew's judgment scene are condemned for what they failed to perceive and therefore failed to do: "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me" (Matt 25:43). Augustine's definition of virtue as rightly ordered love clarifies the structure. The question for him is never how much one loves but in what order; vice is love fastened on the wrong object or holding a lesser good above a greater.[57] A community that loves its reputation, its calm, or its hierarchy more than the member who is bleeding has a disordered love, and no quantity of doctrinal precision corrects an error of order. The anti-empathy teaching presents a quantitative remedy for what it takes to be an excess of feeling. The biblical and Augustinian diagnosis is that the feeling was never the problem. The loves were out of order, and the rule of feeling was written to keep them so.

Witnesses Beyond the Church

Nothing in the mechanism described above is peculiar to Christianity, and the conference theme invites the comparison. Three kinds of witness are heard here: empirical studies of what regulated feeling does to those who leave high-demand communities of several traditions; psychological research on empathy and moral disengagement; and two relational accounts of personhood, from African philosophy and from Islam, that converge with the reading of the image given above. The last two are reported with the modesty owed to traditions that are not the author's own, and with the cautions each raises against

[57] Augustine, *City of God* 15.22, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003): "a brief and true definition of virtue is 'rightly ordered love'" (*definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris*); *De doctrina christiana* 1.22–28, on *uti* and *frui*. See Oliver O'Donovan, "*Usus* and *Fruitio* in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982): 361–97.

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itself. Their inclusion is not meant to erase the differences among these traditions, but to trace a recurring human intuition that personhood is relational, that life is ordered toward responsibility for the other, and, in explicitly theological accounts, toward the Creator from whom human life is received.

Regulated Grief

Kenneth Doka gave the name "disenfranchised grief" to loss that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.[58] The concept has proved apt for the experience of those who exit high-demand groups. A phenomenological study of former Jehovah's Witnesses found that mandated shunning leaves them mourning family members who are still alive, a social death associated with lasting harm to mental health; a second study of the same population reports that the habit of informing on fellow members "leads to a continued sense of distrust and suspicion long after leaving."[59] Lynn Davidman's interviews with those who left ultra-Orthodox Judaism show exit as the unmaking of a bodily way of life and not only the loss of a belief, and Ayala Fader's ethnography of "hidden heretics" documents the inverse strategy: men and women who no longer believe and who maintain every outward conformity, because disclosure would cost them their marriages, their children, and their world.[60] Fader's subjects are perhaps the clearest case in the literature of belonging preserved by the concealment of the self. Each of these communities differs profoundly from the others and from the Christian case in doctrine and

[58] Kenneth J. Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

[59] Heather J. Ransom, Rebecca L. Monk, and Derek Heim, "Grieving the Living: The Social Death of Former Jehovah's Witnesses," *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 3 (2022): 2458–80; Rosie Luther, "What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah's Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning," *Pastoral Psychology* 72, no. 1 (2023): 105–20. For a comparative qualitative study across four groups, see Dominiek D. Coates, "Post-Involvement Difficulties Experienced by Former Members of Charismatic Groups," *Journal of Religion and Health* 49, no. 3 (2010): 296–310.

[60] Lynn Davidman, *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ayala Fader, *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

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practice. What recurs is Zablocki's variable. Where the price of leaving is one's entire relational world, feeling must be managed, grief goes underground, and the lament that might have told the community the truth about itself is never heard. Michelle Panchuk has argued that the resulting injury deserves the attention of philosophers and theologians as religious trauma in the strict sense, a harm that can incapacitate the very faculties by which a person might worship, and the first survey estimates, preliminary as they are, suggest that the experience is far from rare.[61]

The psychological literature bears on the mechanism with appropriate qualifications. Albert Bandura's account of moral disengagement identifies the cognitive maneuvers, among them euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, and the dehumanizing of victims, by which ordinary people suspend the self-sanctions that would otherwise restrain them from harming others.[62] A vocabulary that renames a report of harm as "blackmail" and a request for accountability as "divisiveness" is euphemistic labeling under another description. Studies of generalized prejudice have repeatedly found low dispositional empathy among its predictors, alongside authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, and research on religious fundamentalism has found it correlated with authoritarian attitudes and with prejudice toward out-groups.[63] These findings are correlational and should be read as such. They do not

[61] Michelle Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma," *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3 (2018): 505–30; Darren M. Slade, Adrianna Smell, Elizabeth Wilson, and Rebekah Drumsta, "Percentage of U.S. Adults Suffering from Religious Trauma: A Sociological Study," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 5, no. 1 (2023): 1–28, which estimates conservatively that 27 to 33 percent of U.S. adults have experienced religious trauma at some point. The estimate rests on a single survey (n = 1,581) and awaits replication.

[62] Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209.

[63] Sam McFarland, "Authoritarianism, Social Dominance, and Other Roots of Generalized Prejudice," *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010): 453–77; Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, "Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1992): 113–33. On the complexity of the relation between empathy and moral judgment, see Jean Decety and Jason M. Cowell, "The Complex Relation Between Morality and Empathy," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 18, no. 7 (2014): 337–39.

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show that suppressing empathy causes authoritarianism. They show that the two travel together, which is what the theological account would predict. The most useful empirical result for the present argument is a distinction. Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki differentiate *empathic distress*, a self-oriented absorption in another's pain that produces withdrawal and burnout, from *compassion*, an other-oriented concern that can be cultivated and sustained.[64] The distinction maps closely onto Stein's. What the critics of empathy rightly fear is empathic distress, the fusion that overwhelms the self. The remedy the neuroscience recommends is the ordering of feeling toward the other's good, which is the remedy the phenomenology and the theology recommend, and the reverse of detachment.

Ubuntu

In the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, personhood is a shared becoming. John Mbiti's dictum, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," and the Nguni proverb that Desmond Tutu rendered "a person is a person through other persons," state an ontology in which relation constitutes the self.[65] Mogobe Ramose develops ubuntu as a philosophy in its own right, and Michael Onyebuchi Eze has given the principle its most careful recent formulation. The proverb, he writes, affirms "one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference"; the other becomes "a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity"; and he concludes that "humanity is a quality we owe

[64] Tania Singer and Olga M. Klimecki, "Empathy and Compassion," *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (2014): R875–78. See also Abigail Marsh, *The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, and Everyone In-Between* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), on the association between sensitivity to others' distress and costly altruism.

[65] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1970), 141, the page given by Menkiti, "Person and Community," n. 1, and by Tosin Adeate, "Mbiti on Community in African Political Thought: Reconciling the 'I' and the 'We,'" *Phronimon* 24 (2023), https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/12205; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." Electronic editions paginate the passage at 29.

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to each other."[66] Eze's qualifications are the point. Recognition of the other *in uniqueness and difference*, a mirror *and only a mirror*: ubuntu so understood is a relational ontology that guards alterity, and it stands closer to Stein's *Einfühlung* than to any fusion of persons. It converges with the vocational reading of the image in holding that belonging is constitutive. In this way, a community does not award belonging. A community can only honor or violate it.

The tradition's internal debate confirms the distinction this paper has drawn. Ifeanyi Menkiti argued that in African thought personhood is processual, something at which individuals could fail, attained through incorporation into the community; Kwame Gyekye replied that such "radical" communitarianism wrongly makes personhood the community's gift, and defended a moderate view on which persons possess a dignity the community does not confer and may evaluate and reject communal values.[67] Dirk Louw has warned of ubuntu's "potential dark side," an "oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group," and treats it as a derailment of a tradition whose genuine form preserves "the other in his otherness."[68] The debate is the same one; relational ontologies are not immune to the bending of belonging toward control. Each carries within it the resources to name the bending as a betrayal.

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[66] Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 49–53; Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 191. For a systematic moral theory built on the tradition, see Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–41.

[67] Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Richard A. Wright, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 171–81, at 172–73; Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chap. 2, "Person and Community: In Defense of Moderate Communitarianism."

[68] Dirk J. Louw, "Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other" (paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, MA, August 10–15, 1998), https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm. See also Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2008): 386–99.

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Fiṭra and Raḥma

Islamic theology speaks of *fiṭra*, the primordial disposition on which God created humankind. The Qurʾanic source is Q 30:30: "This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind; there is no altering God's creation"; the prophetic tradition adds that no child is born except upon the *fiṭra*.[69] Classical readings differ over its content. Some identify it closely with Islam itself; others, among them al-Ghazālī on Frank Griffel's reading, hold that it comprises the knowledge of God as creator and stands *against* the convictions a person has simply inherited from parents and teachers.[70] A Christian theologian should not assimilate the doctrine to her own. What can be said with confidence is structural. *Fiṭra* locates the human being's fundamental orientation and worth in an act of God that precedes every community's formation of the person, and it thereby denies to any community the authority to create or cancel that worth. On the point at issue in this paper it stands where the *imago Dei* stands.

A closer convergence lies in the vocabulary of mercy. Arabic *raḥma*, mercy, and *raḥim*, womb, share the Semitic root that yields Hebrew *reḥem* and *raḥămîm*, and the prophetic tradition draws out the connection in the voice of God: "I am al-Raḥmān. I created the *raḥim* and derived its name from My name. Whoever keeps good relations with it, I keep good relations with him, and whoever severs it, I am finished with him."[71] The saying concerns the bonds of kinship, and its ethic is a kinship ethic. Its

[69] Q 30:30, in M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1385; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2658. For an overview of the doctrine and its contested readings, see Ramon Harvey, "Primordial Human Nature (*fiṭra*)," *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, August 1, 2024, https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/PrimordialHumanNature; and Yasien Mohamed, *Fitrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature* (London: Ta-Ha, 1996).

[70] Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Use of 'Original Human Disposition' (*Fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 1 (2012): 1–32; Camilla Adang, "Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of *Fiṭra* in the Works of Ibn Ḥazm," *Al-Qanṭara* 21, no. 2 (2000): 391–410.

[71] Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī 1907; cf. Sunan Abī Dāwūd 1694 and Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5988, where the womb is said to derive its name from al-Raḥmān. Translation adapted from the rendering at sunnah.com. On the pairing of *raḥma* and

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grammar is nonetheless the one traced above in Isaiah and the Psalms. Mercy is named from the womb; the bond precedes the merit; and to cut off one who belongs to you is to find oneself at odds with the Merciful. Two scriptural traditions that disagree about a great deal agree that compassion is the feeling proper to a belonging one did not confer and cannot revoke.

Belonging Reconstructed: Moral Attention and Covenantal Personhood in Christ

If distorted belonging is built by withholding perception, genuine belonging begins where perception is given. Iris Murdoch called the requisite act attention, "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality," and she took the word from Simone Weil, for whom the love of neighbor in its fullness "simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'"[72] Attention in this sense is Stein's empathy under a moral description. It is just, because it sees what is there and not what the viewer's interests would prefer; it is loving, because it is directed to the good of the one seen; and it is addressed to an individual reality, which no category, however useful, can replace. John Swinton, writing of disability and the church, has given the criterion of belonging that such attention yields: "To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed."[73] The volunteer who would not be returning was included for years. On the day she left, the meeting moved to the next item on its agenda.

raḥim in the Islamic tradition, see Sachiko Murata, "Women of Light in Sufism," *Sacred Web* 12 (2003), and Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), chap. 7, "The Womb."

[72] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 34; Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 105–16, at 115.

[73] John Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (2012): 172–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.676243, in the section headed "To Belong You Need to Be Missed."

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Attention alone does not constitute belonging; it must become responsibility. Bonhoeffer's name for the form responsible life takes is *Stellvertretung*, vicarious representative action, the act of standing in the place of another while remaining oneself. In *Sanctorum Communio* it is the structural principle of the church as a community of persons who bear one another, and in the *Ethics* it is the form of all responsible life, grounded in the deed of Christ, who acts for humanity neither by ceasing to be himself nor by absorbing humanity into himself.[74] The structure is non-fusional by definition. A representative who dissolved into the one represented would represent no one. What Stein describes as a structure of perception Bonhoeffer describes as a structure of love and act, and together they give the positive content of covenantal personhood: persons bound to one another by a claim each did not choose, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal 6:2), without any of them being reduced to a function of the others.

The exegetical anchor is the Christ hymn of Philippians. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:5–7). The self-emptying, *ekenōsen* (ἐκένωσεν), is a relinquishing of status, the *morphē theou* exchanged for the *morphē doulou*, and the one who takes the form of a slave remains the one who was in the form of God.[75] The hymn narrates the movement of one who remains himself toward those who are other than himself, for their sake, to the

[74] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), on *Stellvertretung* as the principle of the church-community; Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), in the section "History and Good," where vicarious representative action is named the basis of responsibility.

[75] Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); on the social force of the descent in a Roman colony obsessed with rank, Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi:* Carmen Christi *as* Cursus Pudorum, SNTSMS 132 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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point of death, and Paul frames it as an imperative of the mind: *touto phroneite* (τοῦτο φρονεῖτε), have this mindedness among yourselves. The authority the hymn celebrates is the precise inverse of the invulnerable leader. It belongs to the one who was exposed.

Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and the destiny of the redeemed is to be conformed to that image (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). What the image looks like in a human life is therefore a question with an answer, and the Fourth Gospel gives it at a tomb. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and those with her weeping, he was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33). John's verb, *enebrimēsato* (ἐνεβριμήσατο), carries a note of indignation, a protest against death's dominion over those he loves.[76] Then the shortest sentence in the Gospels: *edakrysen ho Iēsous*, "Jesus began to weep" (11:35). The mourners wail (*klaiō*); Jesus sheds tears (*dakryō*). The evangelist distinguishes the acts. Jesus does not merge with the crowd's grief, and he does not stand apart from it. He is at the sisters' sorrow as himself, which is Stein's act performed by the one in whom the image is whole. The tears are wept according to the humanity he assumed, and by the communication of idioms they are predicated of the one person of the Son, so that it is God incarnate who weeps, the divine impassibility unviolated and the divine compassion unfeigned.[77] The bystanders read the tears correctly: "See how he loved him!" (11:36). Only then does he command the grave, and even then he gives the last act to the community:

[76] BDAG, s.v. ἐμβριμάομαι; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

[77] On the compatibility of impassibility with the incarnate Son's suffering, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The argument of this paper requires no revision of the classical doctrine; it requires only that the tears be God's own.

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"Unbind him, and let him go" (11:44). The one who restores Lazarus to life leaves it to the neighbors to restore him to belonging.

The Letter to the Ephesians states the result in the vocabulary of this conference. Those who were far off have been brought near, the dividing wall has been broken down, and "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Eph 2:14, 19). Belonging in this household is a gift received before it is a loyalty rendered. Its cost was borne by the one who built it, and the rule of feeling that governs it is stated without qualification: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

Practices of Inclusion

The abstract account yields tests that any spiritual community, long established or newly founded, can apply to itself, and three practices that correspond to them. The questions are: 1) Does the community make room for lament? 2) Is a report of harm heard as testimony, or immediately recoded as something else? And, 3)

Does the community make room for lament? Walter Brueggemann observed forty years ago that a community which loses the lament psalms loses more than a genre. "Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being," and the weaker party has no speech left but praise; when lament is censured, "justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate."[78] More than a third of the Psalms are laments.[79] Psalm 88 ends in darkness and the

[78] Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 57–71, at 60, 63–64.

[79] The proportion is Walter Brueggemann's, as reported by Bobby Morris, "Commentary on Psalm 22," Working Preacher, April 15, 2022, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/good-

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canon preserves the ending. A community that makes room in its common worship for grief that has not resolved, and for complaint addressed to God about what has happened within the community's own walls, has installed a standing check on its self-regard. Soong-Chan Rah and Glenn Pemberton have shown what the practice can look like in Christian congregations; the principle is available to any tradition with a liturgy.[80] Lament is the feeling rule of a free people. It tells the member that her pain is speech, and that the speech is prayer.

Is a report of harm heard as testimony, or immediately recoded as something else? Attentive listening, in the sense the argument has developed, is more than a posture. It is a procedure with moral content. Scripture binds hearing to inquiry and inquiry to protection: a matter is established on the evidence of two or three witnesses (Deut 19:15), the one who first states a case seems right until the other comes and cross-examines (Prov 18:17), and the shepherds of Israel are indicted for failing to strengthen the weak and bind up the injured while they fed themselves (Ezek 34:2–4). Attention and due process are allies. The community that perceives the one who reports harm as a person will investigate with clean hands, because its aim is truth and not the institution's calm; it will bring in outside expertise where its own proximity compromises trust, and it will not convert her report into a task force whose chief product is delay. Judith Herman's clinical axiom, that "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation," has an ecclesial corollary.[81] A process that isolates the one

friday/commentary-on-psalm-22-12, citing Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 6. On the practice, see Pemberton,*Hurting with God*, 15–32.

[80] Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 13–34; Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 15–32.

[81] Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 133. On institutional concealment, see Wade Mullen, Something's Not Right:

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who speaks has already harmed her, whatever it concludes. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys offer a practice-based description of spiritual abuse that any tradition can adapt to audit itself, precisely because it names behaviors and leaves doctrine alone.[82]

The third question is Zablocki's, and it is the most searching: *what does it cost to leave, or to stay while dissenting?* Patient presence is the practice that lowers the price. It means remaining with a member through doubt, grief, or disagreement without requiring resolution as the condition of continued welcome, and greeting in the street the one who has gone. A community confident of its truth can afford this. The community that must punish departure has confessed that its bonds were never strong enough to survive being seen from outside. The Christian form of patient presence has a model in the Gospels' most famous dissenter. Thomas refused the testimony of the ten, and a week later he was still in the room (John 20:24–26). Nobody had put him out.

These questions ask nothing about a community's size, age, or creed. They ask whether its members may grieve aloud, whether its wounded are heard as witnesses, and whether anyone may leave, or doubt, and still be missed. A tradition the wider culture regards as strange may pass them, and a church at the center of national power may fail.

Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 171–92; on bearing witness as resistance to evil, Diane Langberg, Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 214.

[82] Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019); Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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Conclusion

High-control belonging is built on a withheld perception. That is the claim this paper has tried to establish from a community's own account of how its members should feel, and the scholarship on new and high-demand religions supplies the anatomy: a milieu in which perception of the wounded is an impurity, a vocabulary that ends thought, a doctrine that outranks the person, a sealed system in which contrary testimony is inadmissible, an authority that expands as the judgment of ordinary members is disarmed, and at the end of the process, a merger that feels like family. Stein's distinction explains the paradox at the center of it. The community that warns against fusion has fused, and what it has forbidden under the name of empathy is the act by which any of its members could be known.

Theological anthropology adds what description cannot. The image of God is an office conferred on every human being before any community asks anything of her, and the standing that comes with it is hers by a commission no community issued. Israel was commanded to protect the stranger because it knew the stranger's heart. Paul defined membership in the body by whether the suffering of one is felt by all. The true image, standing at a friend's tomb, wept as himself at the grief of others, and then handed a man back to his neighbors to be unbound. To withhold that perception from a fellow bearer of the image is a refusal of the office, and the communities that teach the refusal as a virtue are teaching their members to disown their own face.

Stein saw in 1916 that to perceive another as other is the beginning of all knowledge of persons. She learned in 1942 what a society can do once it has trained that perception out of itself. The distance between those dates is the measure of what is at stake when a church, or any community of the spirit, decides what its members will be permitted to feel.

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