

# We want the good life now: Insights from lived religion for a whole person and communal approach to salvation in the twenty-first century

DEJAN AŽDAJIĆ

Lecturer and research associate at the Freie Theologische Hochschule Gießen, Germany.

Email: [azdajic@fthgiessen.de](mailto:azdajic@fthgiessen.de)

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6090-2618>

## ABSTRACT

WHILE LATE-MODERN PEOPLE IN contemporary western societies may be curious about salvation and have questions regarding the hereafter, they clearly long to achieve human flourishing here and now. To obtain this goal, special prominence is given to the affective dimension, embodied spiritual practices and personal experiences. At the same time, the Church in the west continues to insist on prioritizing cognitive word-based pedagogies and offers merely a marginal emphasis on experiential bodily participation. This strategy that highlights content over purpose has largely resulted in a diminished impact considering the significantly changed religious landscape. Consequently, this paper

intends to offer relevant insights from lived religion with its explicit emphasis on enacted theology as a communal source for catechetical instruction and the whole-body prioritization for a salvific encounter with God. Reflecting on these important aspects contributes to a more contextual and holistic understanding of how the Church can promote the good life now, while increasing its practical effectiveness in its traditional proclamation of God's salvation for the world.

**Keywords:** lived religion, salvation, secularism, human flourishing, embodiment, religious experience

### **TIMES HAVE CHANGED: SALVATION FOR THE HERE AND NOW**

Times are changing, and it appears that in the modern era this notion is not only true, but increasingly accelerating. While Europe has evidently been considered a mission field for decades (Paas, 2012: 45), the ever intensifying secularization process has continued to marginalize the influence and authority of Christianity as the principal blueprint for life and has inaugurated a widespread post-Christian worldview in the context of most western societies (Paas, 2011: 6). While in the past the basic assumption of a supreme and eternal transcendent reality dominated the landscape, today's age is characterized by a clear shift in plausibility structures, where it is completely feasible to live without reference to God. The material world has been intentionally divested of any compelling dependence on transcendent categories for obtaining objective meaning. God is viewed as merely one viable option among many. These changed conditions ought to compel Christians in the west to deeply rethink what the gospel and the lasting message of salvation might be within this post-Christian setting and develop a creative vision of how best to present the unchanging biblical story considering the new circumstances.

The beginning of this transformation can be broadly traced back to the Reformation, and from there through Enlightenment philosophy until the present time (Gregory, 2012). With the permission to abandon the perceived constraint of institutional religion and any perceived guilt regarding the burden of spiritual responsibility coupled with the ensuing emancipation of the individual, disbelief had no longer significant social repercussions. Established rules or fitting into a cultural order that provided a certain sense of identity was replaced with unprecedented personal freedom. Salvation shifted from participation in the life of the Church to the independent activity of attaining personal fulfilment and happiness (Rooms, 2018: 102–103). The notion that people are in

their essence worshipping beings was firmly negated. Not only has the need for God incessantly decreased, but the abolition of God has even been considered by some as a necessary precondition for genuine fulfilment. The basic claim is that the rejection of God and the acceptance that human beings are alone in the universe represents the ultimate expression of bravery and the requirement for actual freedom (Rollins, 2012: 201–202). Even for those who chose to continue participating in religion as one legitimate option among many, this has been manifestly reduced to a private endeavour, where acceptance by God no longer depended first and foremost on institutional Church membership and demands for creedal affirmation. Instead, religion needed to conform to a private vision about the world and the inner judgment of the individual about the ultimate meaning of life. Long-standing concepts such as sin, confession, and redemption, all became personal categories that encouraged an individualistic form of faith that would have been inconceivable to previous generations.

This privatization and internalization of faith resulted in the reduction of external, cultic practices and the migration of spirituality to where believing became an inner, intellectual category, which occurred somewhere within, deep on the inside of the autonomous independent thinking subject. People increasingly began to believe that they were finally liberated from cultic constraints and clerical authority and were now not only responsible, but also able to make their own decisions and shape their own destinies. The vision of human flourishing became the end goal. The premise that individuals were perhaps unable to save themselves became incomprehensible, thereby further depreciating the need for ecclesiastical communities and divine assistance. But is transcendence a threat, or perhaps the only satisfying response to the perpetual longings of the human heart? Perhaps it is possible to represent the role the Church less as an institution of repression, and more of a communal journey of transformation. Nevertheless, this remarkable development of private autonomy and trust in the boundless potential of humanity combined with the simultaneous decline of belief in eternal life and the need for God, resulted in the attempt to construct meaning and significance through personal effort without any reference to a transcendent reality.

God has in effect ceased to be part of the daily way of life for a majority of late-modern people, while individual worth and a successful existence is now primarily sought within the boundaries of an immanent framework (Seel, 2018). Long-established concepts such as sin, redemption and salvation, that for centuries carried inherently agreed defining characteristics, have been reinterpreted and have taken on new meanings. This secular re-appropriation of familiar terms reveals fundamentally changed assumptions that must be taken

seriously. For instance, while most theologians would agree that the doctrine of salvation entails certain promises and benefits in this world it must also by necessity await its final fulfilment in the future. Such a predetermined soteriological postponement, however, has ceased to be considered good news (Paas & Schaeffer, 2021: 334). The enduring human dilemma and profound quest to discover the underlying meaning of life abandoned any post-mortem conceptions and focused predominantly on the present actualization of human flourishing. For this reason, the ultimate spiritual, and presently non-tangible aim of salvation gradually transformed into a search for immediate satisfaction in everyday life and the concrete achievement of human happiness today.

While contemporaneous flourishing in daily life is certainly also anchored deep within Christian theology, traditional approaches have until now tacitly assumed that our dialogue partner shared a similar view about a transcendent existence. This constitutes a methodological hurdle and exposes an inadequate understanding of the changes that have taken place. We need a renewed imagination about ultimate meaning and human flourishing in order to develop a viable response to the self-sufficiency that is characteristic of today's secular societies. The new circumstances of a disparate accentuation regarding the location and exact timing of salvation's manifestation assuredly represents pressing interpretive as well as communicational challenges that must be addressed and overcome. It has become indispensable to stop speaking past the listeners. The contemporary Christian understanding of salvation and other relevant theological categories is clearly confronted with a reordered western culture, thereby necessitating an intelligible representation of what it means to be saved. Added to these significant changes has been the pluralization and resultant relativization of traditionally established truth claims.

In our secular age there is an overwhelming number of possible choices for belief. Modern people may perhaps be unable to determine absolute truth but that is acceptable assuming that the freedom to independently choose remains. The Kantian notion that equivocated freedom with limitless choice appears to dominate secular thinking. The emancipation from perceived constraints that inevitably leads to a wide diversity of possibilities is readily preferred, even if the consequence is a pronounced fragmentation and a high probability of uncertainty (Noble, 2018: 54). As long as people are free to choose according to an inner standard, the intrinsic essence of the object of belief or its correspondence to axiomatic norms remains secondary. Objective facts are now individually determined, where each person is entitled to being the locus of absolute meaning. Flaws in basic beliefs and the resulting dissonance is hardly troubling, since there are always new ideas and additional evidence to consider. And since truth

is perceived to essentially be subjective and geared towards pragmatic results, choosing a loose patchwork of beliefs that periodically contradict one another does not necessarily require rational congruency.

Moreover, due to globalization, the multiplication of diverse options and an indefinite number of contested possibilities, that which is real must ultimately be determined by the independent authority of either the individual or a cohesive community of individuals. This democratization of truth, where the opinion of the majority assumes the prerogative to determine what is right, has further contributed to the erosion of previously held common ground. Certainty about right and wrong is perpetually questioned and traditional binary thinking largely discredited as an inferior approach to comprehending reality as a whole and successfully navigating through life. Knowledge about ultimate truth inescapably remains partial and actual lived experience suggests a perpetually continuing modification of perspectives on the world. Seel suggests that the essential attitude for modern people is that they believe that, “Pure truth is an abstraction, not a lived experience” (Seel, 2018: 49). Instead, what is important is to live authentically according to an ongoing internal and progressive process of discovery, rather than submit to any external dogmatic propositions.

Truth has essentially migrated from an external objective reality, which was for centuries fundamentally informed by the Christian story, to its current location on the inside, where “safe within our heads, we interpret what is good, what is true, what is beautiful, and who we are” (Noble, 2018: 89). While this interiorization of truth by self-reliant and self-confident individuals has been part of modern culture for some time, the current constellation that continues to elevate individual independence at the expense of any collectively accepted foundational and permanent axioms, has resulted in deepening the rift between past assumptions and the present reality. This unique combination of a desired immediacy of salvation that is principally expressed through this-worldly goals, with previously accepted facts becoming subjective and internal, has led to the complete prioritization of pursuing personal well-being and momentary pleasures (Sayers, 2010: 19). Simply put, a particular form of pragmatic expediency has for secular people become the essential guiding principle for determining reality. The natural consequence of the relativization and subordination of truth to the fluctuating preferences of individuals has been an increased insistence on the guiding role of experiences in their supposed ability to detect and confirm the authentic.

The logic is clear. If definitive certainty is denigrated and perpetually mixed with doubt, and absolute external objective meaning ultimately unattainable, then a decisive strategy must be employed to find other reliable sources that

offer explanatory assistance and orientation to make sense of reality. For this reason, the only valid approach to transcend human limitation and apprehend genuine truth is to rely on subjective affections and experiences. The dependability of a rationally assumed philosophical worldview or the correctness of a particular external object of belief has become subordinate to the principle of expressive individualism and the strength of genuine individual feelings (Smith, 2014: 88). The fundamental search for axiomatic truth that would be congruent with rational categories was replaced with the pursuit of happiness, which was, “attainable through all sorts of experiences which, even if chosen, must be felt to be enjoyed” (Marsh, 2018: 19). The process of authenticating reality must consult individual feelings. In this way, affective experiences are no longer considered a by-product of engaging in certain spiritual practices or the implicit result of intrinsically meaningful action, but rather the determining standard that necessarily legitimizes all authoritative claims truth. Strictly speaking, if the felt experience is meaningful, authentic and positive, then there is a greater inclination to believe the theoretical content. Stories, the imagination and emotional impressions consequently trump abstract reflection.

Considering the enduring reality of this changed landscape, where late-modern people display vastly altered views on life, meaning and salvation, then how should the Church respond? If human agency is viewed as self-sufficient and responsible for attaining the good life now apart from any divine assistance and if the inherent implication of what the gospel actually represents is left to each individual for personal interpretation, then traditional methodologies of communication are inherently restricted. Moreover, if emotions and the longing for immediate human flourishing eclipse propositional content and the promise of an anticipated fulfilment in the hereafter, then contemporary Christian efforts to reach today’s secularized population with a convincing message of God’s salvation for the world must be realigned. To properly respond to these important challenges and advance constructive suggestions for future ecclesial practices, it is important to first offer a brief overview of the currently dominating strategy. Following this limited analysis, I will introduce salient insights from research in the field of lived religion. In the final section, these insights will be further explored for the purpose of finding holistic and potentially more effective approaches to achieve the long-term overall aim of succeeding to convey the Christian conception of salvation and the good life within the secular context of contemporary society.

## **SALVATION: A GOOD STORY NEEDS MORE THAN WORDS**

In the previous section I argued that the typical leitmotif for most Western culture is a pronounced longing for instant happiness and well-being that fundamentally depend on affective experiences to be considered authentic. For salvation to be good news, it is expected to be both pragmatic and immediate. Additionally, since axiomatic demarcations of objective truth are continuously shifting and ultimately contingent on autonomous acceptance by independent individuals, rational categories, and cognitive-based approaches as the primary means of transmitting religious content in contemporary pluralized society have increasingly lost their effectiveness. A word-based approach, where individuals can remain safely within the boundaries of the interior intellectual self, freely able to accept or reject propositional claims to truth appears to be less than optimal. Seel explains, “Much of our pedagogy is head, heart, and hand, or observation, interpretation, and application, when just the reverse is actually how we learn: hand, heart, and then head” (Seel, 2018: 19). It appears that theoretical ideas are best comprehended and internalized through the transformational power of embodied participation.

This is precisely what Butler argued, saying that theology is essentially embodied in practices and that “the distinction drawn between participating and thinking begins to erode as thinking becomes about participation and participation becomes an act of discernment” (Butler, 2020: 287). Since texts and ideas are inherently dependent on concrete embodiment in time and space and there is a seeming inseparable hermeneutical connection between beliefs and practices, then any meaningful religious tradition ought to be able to satisfy both body and intellect. Consequently, there has been for many years an ecclesiastical wrangling with the question about finding an appropriate balance between Word and Sacrament (Ross, 2014). Does the cognitive acceptance of content based on words supersede the more multidimensional sensory experience of faith being expressed through a variety of external means? While there certainly has been a recent tendency to reemphasize certain liturgical elements within Protestant churches (Rempel, 2020), the spoken words still remains the predominant approach. Carefully choreographed ritual enactments have been largely replaced with a particular message that can be grasped with the mind. Verbal discourse takes precedence over bodily participation.

There are several examples of this attitude. For instance, Cronshaw and Barnett pointedly disapprove of the prevalence of word-centrism that is especially evident in today’s seminary education, saying, “Words, and words about words, are the currency of theological education” (Cronshaw and Barnett,

2017: 5). The role of the body as a significant locus of religious learning has been mostly disregarded. This is unfortunate since true spirituality cannot be reduced to a cerebral exercise. The teaching of doctrine that neglects a holistic engagement with embodied practices will be severely limited to achieve its intentions, for it is paramount to enable practitioners to relate theological insights to a pragmatic understanding of how this may affect their everyday lives (Chan, 2006: 67). Another example of the pervasive attention on words and texts, often combined with an implicit anti-liturgical stance, is hardly anywhere more discernible than in many of the sermon-centric worship services, where knowledge about God typically depends on the communicative skills of gifted speakers, who are trained in the mastery of verbal exposition. In tandem with several other important developments, the evolution of the sermon as the main pedagogical and spiritual tool to comprehend God also has its roots in the Reformation, where “the rise of the word was at the expense of the use of the body in worship. Benches and pews took up space that would previously have been available for the movement of people in procession or for kneeling in prayer. Worship became increasingly a rational exercise” (Senn, 2012: 45). Knowing God through a holistic, co-participatory, bodily engagement gradually decreased in favour of passive listening with the predominant goal of cognitive comprehension.

While it is certainly possible to attain spiritual insights and succeed in reaching certain religious experiences through a left brain, word-based emphasis, this rational orientation also suggests a somewhat incomplete understanding of what it means to be human, since it is ultimately unable to reach the whole person. It also reveals the reoccurring tendency towards a dualistic, even reductionistic view of material reality, which tends to have “a very partial view of the human person” (Crawford, 2015:8). It is obvious that people are far more than thinking beings that can be satisfied by verbal concepts and abstract ideas. This viewpoint does not exclude rationality as one legitimate element among others that can certainly nurture devotion and facilitate a meaningful religious experience. The critique is rather directed toward the asymmetrical emphasis that reveals certain insufficiencies. What needs to be reassessed is the implicit assumption that views cognition as automatically superior to all other ways of attaining spiritual fulfilment and knowledge about God. A more balanced and holistic understanding requires a deeper anthropological affirmation of the interconnectedness of the physical body as a necessary vehicle for the transmission of religious truth. Becoming fully human is fundamentally an invitation to go beyond a rigid mind-body dualism that often disregards the significance of the body and the implicit embodied nature of all theological knowledge.



Yet despite these important insights and especially considering the contemporary context where people demand an integrative and pragmatic vision of life, the Christian tendency continues to be an emphasis on the content of faith, while undervaluing the critical prominence of its purpose and function. For instance, it appears more common to answer what salvation means in terms of its doctrinal implication or an eschatological future, rather than what its precise purpose is for the here and now. Marsh argues, that is crucial to strive toward a considerable reorientation in the Christian communication about how salvation is understood and to “address the question of what salvation means for the present” (Marsh, 2018: 209). If salvation is principally tied to an abstract story about the next life, then it will have foreseeable difficulties to compete in the pluralized marketplace of multiple stories that confidently proclaim flourishing in this world. This in no way denigrates the significance of the Christian story and its promise of salvation that is made available through faith in Christ. Revelation and God’s Word are crucial for helping people to understand their deep-seated hungers and hidden hopes. Words and ideational content remain decisive in addressing people’s true identity, perceptions about the world, and the intense longings of the heart, which ultimately can influence their decision-making and behaviour (Smith, 2013).

Even for thoroughly secular people, stories are foundational to make sense of this world (Roberts, 2020; Glasson & Marsh, 2019), which is why it is important for Christians to continue to tell their version as convincingly as possible. The essential nature of any religion or worldview is to persuade others that their story and vision of the ultimate good life is worth believing, which is why, “religious stories are not necessarily different in kind from the other stories we tell” (Marsh, 2020: 53). The challenge remains, however, that the Christian story ought to go beyond its proclivity to overemphasize words and theological assumptions and take seriously the whole person. This includes individual passions, experiences, and a profound embodied existence. The story cannot be limited to eternal life beyond the grave but must include quality of life and flourishing now. Prioritizing these elements and pursuing an intentionally holistic aspiration to inspire people’s imagination is precisely what has always made up the core of any lived religion. A brief examination of some of the foundational areas of emphasis within the framework of lived religions can therefore help to provide important insights for the Christian approach in its attempt to recalibrate the way of presenting its message of salvation within the current circumstances.

**INSIGHTS FROM LIVED RELIGION ON SALVATION AND THE GOOD LIFE**

Research on lived religions has been a well-established discipline within religious studies for many years (Ammerman, 2021). Rather than looking at religion through texts, it investigates how ordinary people apply theological concepts and beliefs in their everyday lives and within their specific local context. Since it is too vast a field to discuss in any detail here, I aim to focus on merely two relevant and hence important ideas. Lived religions due to their fundamentally pragmatic orientation deliberately allocate special attention to genuine human flourishing and embodied experiences (McGuire, 2008). Aside from the theoretical content, the essential goal of believing and consequently applying religious values in day-to-day living is to generate a successful way of life. Religion does not solely correspond to verbal truths and cognitively derived spiritual insights, instead its cardinal function is to, “make us act and to help us live” (Durkheim, 1995: 419). In response to complex realities, uncertainties and significant challenges, people usually design common strategies across multiple settings in their attempt to attain meaning and contentment (Ammerman, 2014). When certain institutionally derived requirements and religious obligations hinder the achievement of these principal objectives, then religious practitioners quickly find creative ways of pragmatic reinterpretation and new ways to implement those aspects in order to ensure their personal well-being. Simply put, a system of normative beliefs is not always at the heart of religious behaviour. Ordinary people constantly engage in a negotiation process. Ambiguity, not rigid orthodoxy describes the distinctive nature of lived religion. The key common denominator, however, invariably remains the aspiration to the good life.

Liberation Theology scholars have known this for decades and have been quite critical of an individualistic, future-oriented understanding of salvation. For them salvation ceases to be good news if it fails to provide substantial deliverance from material lack as well as positive socioeconomic benefits in everyday life. As this debate rages on and both sides endeavour to achieve a more balanced perspective, the plausible dangers are evident. On one hand there exists the possibility of instrumentalizing religion for personal gain. That which is expedient and helpful could be viewed as more important than that which is true. This leads to a devaluing of theological norms and an overly positive view of human potential. The necessity for belief in traditionally upheld doctrinal content could eventually be replaced with social activism and liberation from all forms of oppression in this life, where improved relationships and

not regeneration become paramount (Morris, 2014). On the other hand, a too narrow view of salvation that does not sufficiently acknowledge the various dimensions that God intends to redeem in this world may become irrelevant. This is why “Christians need to believe that the gospel is not only relevant for our soul and in the afterlife, but also for our bodies, relationships, and our lives here and now” (Paas, 2021: 148). Although the conflict between the utilitarian aspects of salvation and the commonly assumed transcendent orientation continues to persist (Aždajić, 2021), it is important to take people’s aspirations to flourish seriously. Lived religions understand that humans fundamentally long to thrive. Consequently, to attract followers it is paramount to provide an adequate response that satisfies these tacit desires. And one of the most significant, yet undervalued, ways to achieve this objective is to offer an explicit focus on affective experiences and an overtly embodied theology.

Lived religion recognizes that belief is not primarily cognitive or theoretical, but rather that it has an overtly physical dimension. Consequently, embodied expression provides an inviting platform for becoming more fully human by satisfying the desire for emotional contentedness and the need for concrete flourishing in this life. The reduction of theology to abstract concepts is essentially impossible because the human body is not only implicitly expressing theological content but is indispensable for theology’s existence and its concrete articulation. Materiality is an essential element of any relevant religion and has a particularly strong grounding in Christianity, since the “Incarnation was not simply a theological premise, but a methodological practice” (Seel, 2018: 118). God taking on flesh is a biblically informed worldview that affirms that corporeality is not subordinate to rationally held beliefs. For this reason, a purely spiritual or ideational focus that overlooks the incarnational emphasis of the Christian faith will always remain inadequate. Bodies fundamentally define who we are and any religious narrative depends on bodily involvement. McGuire describes this as follows, “Human bodies matter, because those practices – even interior ones, such as contemplation – involve people’s bodies, as well as their minds and spirits” (2008: 98). Especially within the contemporary context it is apparent that modern people clearly value embodiment, feelings and that which is experientially good over cognition and theoretical content.

Not only does an embodied focus aim at people’s desires on an emotional level, lived religion likewise understands that any deep comprehension about God must go beyond the intellect and is intimately dependent on bodily and interactive forms of knowing. It is fundamentally impossible to discern transcendent truths without being materially active and present in the world (Shapiro, 2011). As theological doctrines are enacted through a choreographed

spatial-temporal event, new pathways are opened to go beyond abstract ideas into a transformational process that encompasses the entire person. Thus, the body does not merely transport information to the mind for analysis but becomes a profound receptor of discernment. An explicit emphasis on body-based learning for attaining meaningful spiritual understanding has invariably comprised the principal pedagogical strategy and lies at the core of most lived religions, where the formative role of practices takes precedence over doctrinal formulations (Clifford & Johnson, 2019). This perspective reveals additional insights of the paramount importance of an embodied learning process that serves as an implicit medium of cognition, enabling practitioners to learn to believe intellectual content through concrete action. In summary, while human flourishing and experiential fulfilment can be attained through verbal, informational content, insights from lived religions point out that a more direct way may be better achieved through a purposeful focus on the body. Considering these important insights, how can ecclesial communities develop relevant new strategies to improve their current practices of proclaiming the message of salvation?

### **PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING SALVATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

The preceding discussion has highlighted that the conditions for transmitting the Christian message of salvation have radically changed, and that late-modern people are predominantly interested in the benefits of salvation for present-day life, which is typically accompanied by the endeavour to attain experiential satisfaction that is often related to embodied forms of spirituality. Merely hearing words about the good news is not enough. These words are expected to offer concrete advantages and a quality life beginning now. Taking these yearnings seriously the Church in the west can respond appropriately, not by abandoning its responsibility to faithfully proclaim the biblical message of salvation, but merely by reemphasizing certain aspects already contained within its rich historical tradition. Such an increased intentionality avoids the danger of a cultural usurpation of biblical norms, while simultaneously engaging in proper forms of contextualization that can result in more effective ways of communication. While there certainly is an abundance of creative ideas and areas deserving attention, for the purpose of the present discussion I want to suggest two practical ways forward.

First, ecclesial communities would benefit from a return to intentionally exploring various liturgical elements that go beyond the principal use of words. A particular appreciation and accompanying prioritization of the body and its paramount role for enacting theological content has the potential to offer promising possibilities to effectively satisfy some of the most fundamental human desires, while simultaneously transmitting important truths (LaMothe, 2008). Such an exterior reorientation that propagates the body in terms of its profound ability to apprehend religious knowledge does not diminish the significance of text-based information. It merely acknowledges the strategic validity of this approach, for “the praxis of the church is in fact the embodiment of its theology. Christian praxis is understood as the medium through which the Christian community embodies and enacts its fundamental vision of the gospel” (Anderson, 2001: 48). This conceptualization of the gospel is significant, for it goes beyond the affirmation of doctrinal statements by including worship, prayer, interpersonal relationships, and an emotional encounter that has the potential of leading people to assume a posture of wonder. Thus, by processing reality through an experiential engagement that stirs the imagination, salvation can be felt here and now, which is precisely what late-modern people long for. Such an intentional augmentation of the inherent meaning of the gospel affirms the necessity of not merely hearing the message about Christ but experiencing a transformative new life as a direct result of that message (Ward, 2017: 48). Although this line of reasoning may appear self-evident, I argue here that attaining this objective can currently best be achieved through an overriding focus on the body.

Practices are not only remarkably useful to comprehend underlying theoretical content, but any real understanding is wholly conditional upon the guided medium of embodied worship and practical engagement since this approach is fundamentally able to express the substance of belief in a profound way (Grumett, 2015: 15). Simply put, knowing is inseparable from doing. The internal, subconscious dimension that is contingent on the physical body has an enormous formative and transformative function. People often do not change solely through mental processes or an acceptance of elaborate ideas, but through habit-forming activities, repeated gestures, and a myriad of other embodied liturgical activities that imprint relevant information onto their inner being. This does not abrogate the value of verbal communication, it merely elevates the tacit, yet powerful influence of physicalities and active participation as an essential component to impart deep aspects of truth that bring about lasting change. In fact, some recent research has suggested that an intentional focus on a bodily involvement can prove to be more effective during a conversion

process than the traditional models aiming at cognitive understanding (Taylor, 2019). The seemingly simple, habit-forming power of participating through the physical enactment of various Christian practices and rituals seems to be quite constructive in communicating complex propositional concepts that can over time ultimately evolve to an acceptance of the Christian faith. It is a fundamentally useful way that over time forms people's identities and sense of belonging.

The procedure suggested here is not intended to be normative but rather sequential, claiming that the embodiment of implicitly transformative truths ought to precede the comprehension of rational particularities, where experience comes before understanding. It is important, however, that while this process may be personal, it should not remain permanently subjective, but must be given contextual meaning by the interpretive community. Such an approach helps to explain and locate a variety of experiences within the Christian story. One legitimate question at this point may relate to specific liturgical practices that have perhaps proven themselves as decidedly useful in transmitting key doctrinal content. Another consideration may inquire regarding the most promising ways how secular people could be convincingly persuaded to participate in such practices. Since responding to these understandable reflections goes beyond the scope of this article, it is important to highlight again not a formulaic list of prescribed procedures, but the necessity of prioritizing the transformative power of the body as a key tool to impart theological truths and provide avenues for meaningful human experiences. For this reason, the Church would do well to re-envision the significant potential of the existing embodied elements already contained within its liturgical and worship practices. The second strategy besides a renewed focus on the body that can assist ecclesial communities to attain greater effectiveness in their presentation of salvation and the good life is intimately connected to a communal emphasis.

Since human flourishing is dependent upon materiality and an embodied reality, which is fundamentally anchored in the Christian understanding of the incarnation, then from a Trinitarian theological perspective, community and the relational dimension of salvation are likewise indispensable for ultimately achieving the good life (Chandler, 2015). Being made in the image of God from a biblical perspective, human beings must look beyond their individual selves and relate to others. If harmony and love characterize the essence of the triune God, then the good news must entail a soteriological dimension that is both personal and experienced relationally alongside of others. In other words, an essential component of a holistic message of salvation necessarily presupposes the vertical reality of reconciliation to God, while simultaneously emphasizing the horizontally reconciled relationships between people. Although this

position may go against the individualistic attitudes of late-modern people, the fact remains that even within the current secular context, there is a deep longing for meaningful relationships (Seel, 2018: 50). Even for those who show little interest in the theological angle of a restored relationship to God, the deep-seated desire to experience intimate community remains. There are other reasons that make the communal aspect imperative.

The previously mentioned focus on the body for attaining genuine understanding and experiential satisfaction implies a considerable interdependence with others. Sharing life and an active participation in communities of practice are essential because spiritual discernment is contingent upon the embodiment of theoretical content in the presence of others. And since liturgy is inherently individual as well as relational, it provides an ideal platform for collectively enacting and hence articulating a shared theological story. By embodying these stories in unity with others and engaging in an ongoing process of interpretation, comprehension follows. This kind of co-participatory experience can lead to a profound reshaping of deeply held assumptions through a continuously evolving integration of thought and action. Such a reliance on others is deliberate, for it aims to resist the prevalent attitude of autonomy and self-sufficiency that tends to reduce religion and spirituality to a private affair. Instead, a true religious experience and even self-knowledge requires corporate involvement. Propositional content certainly retains its validity, but any authentic emotional fulfilment can only be achieved in the context of shared human relationships. Thus, the participatory dimension and interpersonal relationships take sequential precedence over an individual affirmation of ideas.

Deep transformation requires a thoughtful integration of unifying communal actions and an effective verbal communication of factual content through words. This strategic approach considers the spiritual sensibilities of the entire person and addresses both the intellect and the emotions, which can potentially lead to a genuine faith commitment. Since this may require some time, an intentional openness to the idea of belonging before believing is therefore foundational in providing space for identity construction. During this transformative process the prioritization of embodiment is crucial, since shared social practices by groups of people have always contributed to the development of one's identity (Wenger, 1998). Consequently, the formative and integrative role of collective embodiment to establish belonging and influence belief, further strengthens the significance of a bodily and communal emphasis as imperative for the communication and appropriation of theological truths. Since conditions have significantly changed in the modern secular west, it is crucial to convey a holistic and multidimensional understanding of salvation

that deliberately seeks to proclaim the biblical assurance relating to the future and at the same time provide, “quality of relationship, inner well-being, openness to others, being willing to be challenged, accepting the struggle and cost of growth, and recognizing that one’s own well-being is bound up with that of others” (Marsh, 2018: 210). Reflecting upon this new reality is important, if Christians desire to transmit a relevant and contextually sensitive message that contemporary people consider good news.

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