

Where ‘the unbelievable and the obvious collide’: Spiritual practices and everyday life

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Responding to the discernment that the Christian faith may need to pivot towards a more monastic or even mystical frame so as to offer an invitation to the ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’, this article offers spiritual practices as a bridge. After exploring what a spiritual practice is and examining some characteristics of spiritual practices to show how dynamic they are, this article will investigate the relationship between beliefs and practices. Then, it will examine the work of Michel de Certeau and David Steindl-Rast to make an argument for practices belonging to ordinary people and everyday life. Finally, this article will offer the work of the contemporary author Barbara Brown Taylor and her understanding of practices as everyday tasks to show how a turn to the monastic and mystical is in fact a viable prospect.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article contributes to scholarship on spiritual practices by examining their characteristics and usefulness for people who are alienated from the institutional church yet seeking connection with the Divine. It does so by placing practices in the context of everyday life and in the domain of ordinary people.

Keywords: spiritual practice; everyday life; mysticism; spiritual but not religious; Michel de Certeau; David Steindl-Rast; Barbara Brown Taylor.

Introduction

In his recent book, *This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit and the Rule of Love*, South African theologian John De Gruchy expressed the view that an opportunity is presenting itself to the Western Church. He encouraged his readers to see our time as a *kairos* moment, a chance to change direction, so that the Church can avoid disappearing altogether:

Far too many of us Christians have either been seduced by the false values of the age and the spirit of Christian triumphalism, or else have been attracted to gnostic forms of spirituality that provide a means of escape from reality and responsibility. Any delay in responding to this *kairos* moment increases the danger that we fail to change our ways and grasp the opportunity God gives us to receive the coming kingdom in greater fullness now. (p. 19)

Using St Anthony the Great as an example, De Gruchy proposes a return to a monastic ethos, to a life of devotion, to authentic faith communities (which were prophetic) and to the more affective dimensions of our faith which flourished within the mystical tradition. De Gruchy’s advice seems to accord with other authors such as Phyllis Tickle. Tickle (2012:13–17) believed that contemporary Christians stand at a crossroads, a moment (which she maintained arrives every 500 years or so) in which an opportunity exists for profound change in the structures of the church and its methods for passing on faith.

It is in such a context that this article proposes spiritual practices – ancient, evolved and already existing in everyday life – as a bridge between the spiritual and the religious. Perhaps spiritual practices, and especially those that relate to everyday life, can be a way of offering access to faith¹ to a generation of persons who are no longer at home in the institutional church, who label themselves as ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’ yet still seek to embrace patterns of human flourishing, a relationship with the Divine and a way of life that is collaborative, integrated and life affirming.

To lay a foundation, this article will explore what a spiritual practice is and then examine some characteristics of spiritual practices to show how dynamic they are, before investigating the relationship between beliefs and practices. Thereafter, it will make an argument for practices belonging to everyday life. In the last section, this article will explore the work of the contemporary

¹Christian practice should be understood as, among other things, discipleship; ‘to seek to know Jesus Christ is always to follow him, and, in some sense, to seek to imitate his way’ (Sheldrake 2005:502).

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author Barbara Brown Taylor, her conceptualisation of everyday tasks and actions as spiritual practices and her apologetic for offering everyday practices as a bridge to the growing 'spiritual but not religious' community.

What are spiritual practices?

A spiritual practice is an action.² It is something a person does, often repetitively or as a routine, every day or several times a day. A spiritual practice may also be undertaken as a once-off event, such as a pilgrimage, or periodically, like a spiritual retreat. The word *practice* refers, of course, to the *event* that is the practice (such as prayer or reading scripture) but also the idea that we *practise* these events to get better at them, as a sportsman practises their skill (Perrin 2007:266). Practices often involve simple, everyday actions³ (for example, gardening or doing exercise) (Bass & Dykstra 2002:20). One can become better at them, but they do require the involvement and interaction of all facets of one's being (physical, cognitive and spiritual) (Perrin 2007:266).

The consequence of practising these practices is that 'a way of life that is deeply responsive to God's grace takes actual shape' (Bass & Dykstra 2002:15; see also McLaren 2008:4). It is important to understand practices in relation to such a way of life. Reducing those to disconnected actions would be to deny their ability to shape the persons who practise them. Sheldrake (2005) connects practice with belief,⁴ defining them as 'ways in which a particular spiritual vision is expressed and facilitated in patterns of behaviour, rituals, prayer or other religious disciplines' (p. 502).

People have various motives for undertaking spiritual practices. Sometimes they represent a 'quest for meaning' or a 'grateful human response to God's presence and promises' (Bass & Dykstra 2002:15), and in the process, the practices shape lives. If similar practices are practised through generations, the practice may become codified into a tradition of Christians (such as contemplation in many monastic traditions or the spiritual exercises for Ignatians). The history of Christianity shows how people of faith have always engaged in practices. The early church established some of the most basic practices that Christians still practise today, such as 'breaking bread together', 'sharing possessions', 'singing', 'healing' and 'testifying' (Bass & Dykstra 2002:17). Some practices are communal, while others are practised individually. Practices must be reinterpreted for every generation, and this requires discernment. Finally, spiritual practices are intrinsically interested in justice and freedom, are conscious of social engagement and have 'both a mystical and a prophetic-political faith' (Sheldrake 2005:503).

2. Bass and Dykstra (2010:6) refine their definition by referring to 'concrete human acts'.

3. Bass and Dykstra (2002) warn that spiritual practices should not be confined to the ancient exercises that were a part of monastic life (p. 20). There are other practices, more contemporary ones, that are more appropriate to family life or to life in the community of a local church that are well worth exploring.

4. Beliefs and practices 'mutually inform each other' (Sheldrake 2005:502). Sheldrake understands Christian spirituality in a holistic manner, as 'a way of life' or a 'way of being in the world', and cautions against reducing Christian practice to a set of rituals or actions (Sheldrake 2005).

Characteristics of practices⁵

There are some characteristics of practices which showcase their unique contribution to shape a way of life and their capacity for facilitating transformation in individuals and communities.

Spiritual practices link the past with the present

For contemporary Christians, many spiritual practices are a link with the past,⁶ with the tradition out of which they arose, and they have been passed down in ritual, learned and repeated over centuries of religious liturgy and practice. Some records of how our ancestors practised can be found in sacred scripture (cf. Ac 2:42–47; Mt 3:11–17; 1 Cor 11:34) and others in ancient liturgy, song or ritual (Bass & Dykstra 2010:7). Practices are also embedded in here and now and in the everyday context of people's lives (Perrin 2007:267–268). As such, the past is brought into dialogue with everyday life. The dialogue can be life-giving but also challenging. The practices may embody the wisdom of the past, received as a gift in the present, or they may find themselves isolated and irrelevant in the present, removed from the original reasons for their creation. In this case, the practices need to evolve and be renewed for contemporary spiritual pilgrims. Practices also invite 'improvisation and negotiation' (Bass & Dykstra 2002:26; McLaren 2008:34) and may therefore be improved or deepened. There is no reason that practices cannot evolve to become more helpful or relevant in a particular context.

Practices may also become distorted or damaged. They need to be examined and scrutinised to assess their value for individual and community. Practices which have become unjust or damaging must be discarded or reshaped to become life-giving again (Bass & Dykstra 2010:8).

Spiritual practices are both individual and communal

It is often the individual practices such as prayer, silence and Bible reading that come to mind when one thinks of spiritual practices. However, there are also many communal practices. Richard Foster listed worship, confession and celebration as corporate disciplines in his *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), but even those that are undertaken by individuals may affect the communities to which these individuals belong. The communal practices have established patterns of how they can be practised together (Bass & Dykstra 2010:7). Perrin uses prayer as an example of a spiritual practice which is both individual and communal. Quoting Origen, Perrin (2007) defines prayer as companionship (p. 277). The core of Origen's understanding of prayer is fellowship and relationship (See Jay 1954:79–219). It is more than something Christians do; it is a way of life, of living in the presence of God, seeking to be aware of God's presence. Prayer is not a one-sided endeavour but a cooperative process (Perrin 2007:277) which is often initiated by God.

5. The reluctance of Protestants to embrace spiritual practices was discussed in a previous article (Marchinkowski & De Villiers 2020).

6. McLaren (2008:21–29) explores how several 'Abrahamic practices' shaped Judaism and Christianity in intentional ways as regards humanity's relationship with God.

While 'communities shape their practices' for their own needs, 'practices also shape communities' (Susanne Johnson quoted in Perrin 2007:269). The requirements of a spiritual practice may shape the community's activities and thereby shape the community itself, but the community's needs and circumstances may also shape the practice (p. 269).

Spiritual practices always involve the body and are part of everyday life

All spiritual practices involve the body. They engage the senses, require movement and imagination and operate in and around a living person (Perrin 2007:270), but spiritual practices are also practised in relationship and conversation with others, involving a relational encounter which can shape the persons involved. This characteristic is key in Barbara Brown Taylor's treatment of spiritual practices,⁷ which will be discussed later in this article.

Practices are part of everyday life (McLaren 2008:3, 4). They can involve ordinary tasks, such as gardening, walking or any other daily chore. They collapse the sacred-profane divide and call attention to the presence of God in the ordinary activities of life. They become a part of the process of human transformation and attune the person to the activity of God in the world. Each practice is shaped by its context and by the lives and needs of those who practice it.

Spiritual practices involve different aspects of the person; sometimes, the practice will require physical actions and sometimes cognitive. Sometimes, one of these selves is called to the fore, as through the practice, God works on and in each person (Perrin 2007:271).

Spiritual practices are not utilitarian

While practitioners may have a personal reason or even a practical purpose for undertaking a spiritual practice (Bass & Dykstra 2010:7), spiritual practices are not in themselves goal orientated. More benefit can often be gleaned from the process of doing a practice rather than from a specific envisaged outcome. Practices have a gratuitous quality and can seldom be scientifically described, measured or repeated with the same outcomes every time (McLaren 2008:51; Perrin 2007:272). They can draw us away from the world of measurement and predictability as a practitioner relinquishes control of how the practice 'plays out' and is powerless to control the outcome (Perrin 2007:273).

Spiritual practices are subversive and transformative

Spiritual practices are self-implicating. One cannot undertake them in a disinterested, objective manner. They need to be experienced by participation, as they engage one in a process of spiritual transformation (McLaren 2008:34), an encounter with God. They require personal investment and involve a profound moment-by-moment awareness of God and creation. Practices require awareness and paying attention. They create deeper awareness of the presence of God in the

⁷What is saving my life right now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth' (Brown Taylor 2009:xv).

world (Bass & Dykstra 2010:11). Practices are effective. Perrin (2007) lists several consequences of a vibrant prayer life, including 'love of God', 'love of others' and engagement with the world (p. 277). Practices such as prayer should not be conceived of in a passive way. They are actions that Christians take to meet the challenges of life. Sheldrake (2005) calls attention to the need to balance interior practices with those that encourage an engagement with the world, reminding us of historical examples of excessive interiority (critiqued by Ruysbroeck) and excessive emphasis on penitential practice (p. 502).

Spiritual practices are educational

Spiritual practices are not merely affective, and they have the capacity to expose practitioners to new ideas (McLaren 2008:87) and to invite them to perceive and understand 'other dimensions of life that have been overlooked' (Perrin 2007:275). Since they address fundamental needs and conditions (Bass & Dykstra 2010:6) and involve human and divine working together on something life-giving, they facilitate a kind of 'heart knowledge' (Perrin 2007:275), an understanding which is both known and perceived, a knowledge coming from 'lifelong engagement' and 'sustained participation' (Perrin 2007:275). The person who practises is also cognitively involved in the reshaping of the practices that she practises.

The relationship between practice and belief

Miroslav Volf (2002) considered the question of whether theology relates to everyday life, whether theology is a 'theoretical science' as Aquinas believed, or a 'practical science' as Duns Scotus argued (p. 246). He concluded that it is more properly described as a practical science, since it does not simply 'deliver knowledge', but seeks to serve a way of life (p. 247). To explore the question, Volf offered a memory from his childhood, an expression of hospitality to a stranger on the part of his parents, to illustrate the dialogical relationship between beliefs and practices. He connected the practice of the sacrament of Holy Communion with a family meal into which a stranger was invited and showed how his parents' belief about Holy Communion shaped their practice of hospitality.

A formula: 'As God, so we'

Volf (2002) also introduced an 'as-so' formula, showing that our practice is shaped by our beliefs: '*as* God received us in Christ, *so* we too are to receive our fellow human beings' (p. 250). We learn the implications of our practice by observing the principles of how God has 'practised' in Christ. It follows that our stories are framed within the story of God's redemption of us in Christ and in the greater framework of God's redemptive work in the world (with Israel).

Volf (2002) shows how beliefs shape practices by applying the 'as-so' structure to various core Christian doctrines. Since we believe in the relationship between God and humanity in creation, redemption and fulfilment, 'whenever we speak of

God, we are always involved' (p. 253). Thus, believing something about God involves us in the practice of doing what God does. 'Practices are essentially belief-shaped, and beliefs are essentially practice-shaping' (Volf 2002:254).

The notion that beliefs shape practices is not as difficult to accept, perhaps, as the notion that practices may shape beliefs. Sometimes people come to believe 'either because they find themselves already engaged in Christian practices or because they are attracted to them' (Volf 2002:256). Practices may cause one to embrace a set of beliefs that undergird them or may provide understanding for a set of beliefs, and as a consequence, a person might believe. 'Engagement in practices helps open our eyes to how core beliefs are to be understood and re-formulated as Christians live in ever-changing situations' (Volf 2002:258).

Practices that relate to beliefs in the stages of transformation

Sarah Coakley (2002) analyses the relationship between belief and practice from the perspective of each of the stages of spiritual transformation: the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive 'ways'. She believes that as one moves through the stages, forms of belief 'emerge that could not otherwise be accessed' (p. 78). As Coakley (2002) analyses existing practices that may be categorised within each of these three categories, a pattern emerges. In practices that are purgative, the aim is to set 'one's life in a direction different from the world' (p. 84). The practices are necessarily dogmatic and prescriptive. In practices that are illuminative, practices shape belief as the person begins to identify with Christ. In the final stage, 'more arcane theological insights become available'.

Coakley further claims that practices 'open' us to certain forms of theological knowledge that are 'closed' to us without them. In her exploration, Coakley (2002) suggested three levels at which beliefs and practices influence each other: firstly, belief shapes behaviour through ethical injunction; secondly, by providing the opportunity for practice to experience belief, so that the person is shaped; and thirdly, practice may offer a person the opportunity to appropriate belief by opening the person to the presence of the Divine (p. 84). David Perrin (2007) wrote that 'spiritual practices express in action the values and beliefs of Christians and they help Christians grow in those values and beliefs *as they are practiced*' (p. 226).

Notwithstanding, Kathryn Tanner (2002) warns that:

Christian practices do not in fact require (1) much explicit understanding of beliefs that inform and explain their performance, (2) agreement on such matters among the participants, (3) strict delimitation of codes for action, (4) systematic consistency among beliefs and actions, or (5) attention to their significance that isolates them from a whole host of non-Christian commitments. (p. 229)

So far, this article has explored what a spiritual practice is, examined some characteristics of spiritual practices to show

how dynamic they are and investigated the relationship between beliefs and practices. Now, it will make an argument for practices belonging to everyday life and show how practices do not belong to the institutional church nor even to the Christian tradition but to humanity as a whole, to the ordinary person.

Spiritual practices – To whom do they belong?

One contemporary author who connected spiritual practices to everyday life was the French Jesuit Michel de Certeau.⁸ For De Certeau, mysticism was a social practice rather than simply a series of subjective experiences. It was a process or way of life (Brammer 1992:28; Sheldrake 2010:101), bound up with desire, which 'expresses a certain kind of drivenness, an intensity and movement ever onward inspired by what is *not* known, *not* possessed, *not* fixed or final' (Sheldrake 2010:101) and 'is essentially radical and disruptive, both religiously and socially' (p. 101).

De Certeau grounded his views in what he believed was a significant change in history between the mid-16th and 17th centuries when the influence of the Christian church on European society began to wane and the Christian religious worldview began to lose its dominance. The change, he believed, resulted in the rise of mystical writings (such as in Spain in the late 16th century). The prevailing interest became focused on interior experiences which seemed to be detached from doctrine or Church life, and in the process, the very concept of the 'mystical tradition' came into being. As a consequence, the mystical tradition, stretching back from the post-Reformation through the Middle Ages to the early Church, was artificially constructed (Sheldrake 2010:102). Soon after the construction of this mystical tradition came the gradual psychologisation of the study of mysticism, where private insights and special experiences became the criteria for the presence and validity of 'the mystical' (p. 102).

Mysticism heralded a totally different paradigm in the Christian tradition, since it was not focused on structures or doctrine but on a set of practices and actions (Brammer 1992:28; Sheldrake 2020:102–103):

Mysticism is neither a religion nor a philosophy but is grounded in lived experiences and practices that are heterogeneous, nonlinear, particular, and often nondiscursive. The mystical 'event' or experience is generally unpredictable and irreproducible in scientific terms. (p. 29)

De Certeau thus moved the focus of mysticism away from the sainted mystics and their ecstatic experiences and placed it squarely in the realm of everyday life and on the experience of ordinary people. He also proposed that no attempt should be made to objectively analyse such events, since they are basically 'unpredictable' and 'irreproducible'.

⁸Sheldrake referred to Michel de Certeau (2010) as 'one of the most creative interdisciplinary minds of the 20th century, a highly original writer on Christian mysticism' (p. 100). An excellent overview of his life and work can be found in Zemon Davis (2008).

The Christian faith consists of practices

The crux of De Certeau's view, therefore, at least for our purposes here, is that the Christian faith is at its core neither an institution nor a set of doctrines and beliefs but rather an open, yet reproducible, set of practices.

De Certeau offers a few remarkable parameters. He believes that mysticism is social, not purely personal and interior. It is actively social in that it affects and transforms the world (Sheldrake 2010:105), and he also characteristically locates mysticism away from the decision-makers of the world, calling it a 'way' of people who were socially, culturally and religiously on the boundaries (p. 105), who wander and journey (Sheldrake 2012:209), with no security apart from the story of Christ which is to be 'practised' rather than objectively asserted (Sheldrake 2010:106, 2012:209). To De Certeau, the faith belongs to the ordinary person and is lived out in simple, everyday practices.

The faith belongs to the ordinary person and to everyday life

At the end of Michel de Certeau's life, his thoughts about spirituality became detached from the institutional church and perhaps even from conventional faith, as he became more interested in the landscape of everyday life (Sheldrake 2010:110). He began to conceive of spirituality not in terms of the ecstatic experiences of religious mystics, but with 'a more tentative self-transcendence experienced in succession of fragmented encounters with everyday "others"' (p. 110). He wanted to encourage ordinary people 'to uncover for themselves, in their own situation, their own tactics, their own creations and their own initiatives' (De Certeau quoted in Sheldrake 2012:210). The 'everyday' was now understood to have a transcendent, mystical quality. 'Daily life is scattered with marvels' and these are to be found everywhere. In so doing, De Certeau disclosed the ordinary as mystical (Sheldrake 2012:210). His focus was on ordinary people and on everyday life. He considered ordinary people to be very inventive in developing both discursive and nondiscursive 'tactics'⁹ necessary for life (Brammer 1992:31).

Another contemporary author who has showcased the ownership of mysticism by ordinary people and the locus of spiritual practices in everyday life was the Benedictine David Steindl-Rast. Steindl-Rast (2016) believes that 'every human being is a special kind of mystic' (p. 29) and that no one experiences the Divine in the same way. This means that each person is a mystic in a unique way. Persons of faith need to access their inner child to invoke our tremendous capacity for curiosity about life and the Divine (Steindl-Rast 2016:30).

Referring to Abraham Maslow's term 'peak experiences', Steindl-Rast explores the mystical experiences of ordinary people, which occur unexpectedly and are unrelated to purpose. Steindl-Rast (2016) defines these experiences as

⁹De Certeau ceaselessly returns, like the mystic, to the act of practicing itself' (Brammer 1992:36).

moments in which a person experiences elation, more elated than at other moments:

[I]t is a moment, although it may last quite some time; even then that long time, say an hour or so, appears as a moment. It is always experienced as a point in time, just as the peak of a mountain is always a point ... a moment if limitless insight. (p. 32)

Steindl-Rast (2016) agrees with De Certeau that mysticism belongs to the ordinary person by referring to the democratisation of mysticism (p. 81). Mystics of the past were seen as those who exhibited unexplainable behaviour, and even contemporary mystics are often held in suspicion, but mysticism is simply 'the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality' (p. 81).

Most people experience communion, even if only momentarily and sporadically, but the experience is ordinary and nearly universal. Steindl-Rast writes that some who have had these mystical experiences feel challenged to 'translate' them so that ordinary people may live them in everyday life (p. 82). He even explores the notion that religion might evolve from a series of mystical experiences (which he believes is the very heart of religion) into organised religion. He shows how when people try to understand their mystical experience, they can then seek to interpret it and, in the process, develop doctrine. The development of ritual is the next step in codifying a religion, as people seek to relive the memory. He concludes that every religion has a mystical core. The challenge is to find it, access it and live in its power (2016:88).

It is the acknowledgement that the faith belongs to ordinary people in everyday life, and not to a spiritual elite who access it only in moments of ecstasy, that is exemplified in the work of contemporary spiritual author and memoirist Barbara Brown Taylor.

Barbara Brown Taylor's enlarged 'house'

Barbara Brown Taylor is an American Episcopal priest and best-selling author¹⁰ who left the parish¹¹ in the early 2000s to teach and to write. Her books *Leaving Church, An Altar in the World* and *Learning to Walk in the Dark* track a growing demographic within American Christianity who have found themselves progressively less at home in the institutional mainline Protestant church. Taylor described her books as 'all dedicated ... to scooping up the bottom halves of things', that is, to reclaiming what over the long course of Christian history has been trashed or 'rejected on bogus grounds' (Hawkins 2017:280).

Having 'left church', Taylor found multiple 'altars in the world', as she sought connection with God on behalf of

¹⁰In 1996, Baylor University named Taylor one of the 12 'most effective preachers in the English-speaking world' (<https://www.newsweek.com/heard-any-good-sermons-lately-175712>), and Time magazine placed her on its annual list of 100 most influential people in the world in 2014. <https://time.com/70780/barbara-brown-taylor-2014-time-100/>. Both retrieved 22 July 2022.

¹¹'She has not exactly "left" church, but has largely been finding God elsewhere—down on the farm, at her father's deathbed, in a cave.' (Hawkins 2017:280)

ordinary people in everyday life. Taylor proposed that more mundane daily activities such as preparing a meal or even walking can be considered spiritual practices in their own right (Brown Taylor 2009:xvii). Her thoughts are reminiscent of the writings of Brother Lawrence (Nicolas Herman), a lay brother working for a Carmelite community, in his little book published posthumously, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence believes that ordinary tasks can become spiritual practices if they are done in the presence of the Divine by a person attentive to God's voice and activity.

Brown Taylor's (2009) work focuses on the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' who simply:

Want to grow closer to God, but not at the cost of creeds, confessions, and religious wars large or small. Some of them have resigned from the religions they once belonged to, taking what was helpful with them while leaving the rest behind. Others have collected wisdom from the four corners of the world, which they use like cooks with a pantry full of spices. (p. xiii)

As she understood her audience, they longed 'for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life' (Brown Taylor 2009:xvi). This group experienced a connection with transcendence in ordinary living, 'in nature, in love, in art, in grief', since they did not 'find room' in the institutional church¹² to explore their connection with God. '[T]hey often find the rituals hollow and the language antique' (Brown Taylor 2009:xvi; Walker 2022:190).

It is to these spiritual seekers that Taylor addresses her work (Hawkins 2017:280), suggesting not only that there are multiple places ('altars') at which people might find the connection that they seek, but she also points out that such connection with God can be found in the here and now. The opportune moment for transformation is the present moment, and the key location is wherever the spiritual seeker is right now, in the 'everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives' (Brown Taylor 2009:xv). Taylor uses her own life¹³ to explore places beyond conventional faith, beyond the purview of the Church, 'those dark places she was early taught to fear rather than learn from – to flee rather than work with' (Hawkins 2017:281).

Spiritual practices belong to everyday life

For her de-churched audience, Taylor's work explores, in her trilogy of books, the world outside the institutional church, the body in addition to the spirit, and the dark along with the light.¹⁴ Walker notes that Taylor uses allegory to interpret religious symbols in a pluralistic way. She describes ways to practise viable forms of postmodern faith, abandoning 'the

12. 'Across the planet, people are taking responsibility for their own versions of meaning and, in the process, are remaking faith in ways that are more inclusive, more personal, more connected to the natural world and more attentive to their community' (Diana Butler Bass quoted in Hawkins 2017:282).

13. Hawkins (2017:279) refers to Taylor as a '[m]emoirist' since her life so often provides the content for her books.

14. Walker (2022:184) points out that for both Brown Taylor and for the mystical writer Evelyn Underhill, 'the world presents itself to them as "open". They perceive and interpret the world through their bodies'.

language of opposed pairs common to Christian teaching' (Walker 2022:188).

In the process, Brown Taylor (2009) discovers that there are spiritual practices consisting of simple, everyday activities that offer a bridge to the transcendent. Ordinary physical tasks, when engaged 'with the most exquisite attention' (p. xv), are able to provide pathways to connection with God and a process of spiritual transformation that may result in human flourishing and abundant ways of life (p. xv).

For Brown Taylor (2009), simple bodily practices, performed in the context of everyday life, can provide respite in a religious landscape dominated, especially in the West, by a culture of doctrines requiring cognitive assent and intellectual commitment. These practices could produce the kind of faith that results in a way of life (p. xvi), and by so doing, Brown Taylor (2009) believes that a 'purposeful return to these practices has the power to save religions that have just about run out of breath' (p. xvi).

In the process of her exploration, Brown Taylor (2009) must confront her ties to the institutional church, established by the culture in which she was raised and shaped by her theological training. She emerges with a larger frame: 'We forgot that the whole world is the House of God' (p. 4). The 'house' that she finds is both larger than she first understood, and she realises that she has no control over access to this 'house' (Brown Taylor 2009:13). 'Yet it is Taylor's ability to speak of her glimpses of the holy in the ordinary experiences of her life that suggests the possibility that we too have more daily encounters with the holy than we know' (Hawkins 2017:289). One of the major gifts of Taylor's writing is her portrayal of the spiritual life as a shared endeavour (Hawkins 2017:289).

What kinds of practices does Taylor showcase?

Taylor's choice of spiritual practices (in her book *An Altar in the World*) varies from alternative treatments of the classic spiritual practice of discernment, which she covers in her chapters entitled 'Waking up to God' and 'Paying attention' to unique conceptualisations of such ordinary everyday actions as 'walking on the Earth' and 'getting lost'. For these 'new practices', she provides compelling reasons from her own story (Brown Taylor 2009:53–56, 78–80) and from the Christian tradition (pp. 65–66, 73–75) for understanding them as spiritual practices. Towards the end of the book, she takes a well-known and time-honoured spiritual practice, 'Prayer', and she reinterprets it away from traditional descriptions, to include many simple everyday ways in which ordinary people carry their deep-seated concerns before a gracious God. In so doing, Taylor brings spiritual practices into everyday life, using them as a bridge between ordinary people and the Divine.

Taylor's *axis mundi* is the body (Walker 2022:189). The body is the only accessory, the only tool present in each of Taylor's spiritual practices:

Brown Taylor creates sacred space by the sheer presence of her body walking, getting lost, praying, suffering, paying attention, listening, kneeling, waiting ... In her experience, every place has its own spirit, its own character and depth. These altars are sensory experiences observed, described, lived by a specific, highly educated, professional Anglican woman in a specific time of her life. (p. 192)

Ordinary actions, coupled with spiritual insight (the eyes to see), become a bridge in the midst of everyday life for ordinary people to engage with the Divine. In so doing, their lives are shaped and reshaped. This is spiritual transformation at a very basic yet comprehensive level. Spiritual practices are owned by ordinary people in everyday life.

Conclusion

As John De Gruchy (2021) ends his book, he asks the question, 'If this is a monastic moment, as I have argued, what is the Spirit and the Word saying to the Church today as we reflect on it?' (p. 138). De Gruchy approaches the question from many angles before settling on a proposal by Esther de Waal: 'What we need above all is an inner stability,' which, as Esther de Waal so perceptibly observes, is 'stability in terms of some internal space, that we carry around', so that, no matter where we are, we find ourselves 'at home', that is, in the space where God is present' (De Waal quoted in De Gruchy 2021:172). I believe that spiritual practices which belong to ordinary people and are practised in everyday life offer a bridge to such a stability and an embrace of this monastic moment.

This article explored what a spiritual practice is and then examined some characteristics of spiritual practices to show how dynamic they are, before investigating the relationship between beliefs and practices. Thereafter, it made an argument for practices belonging to everyday life. In the last section, this article explored the work of the contemporary author Barbara Brown Taylor, her conceptualisation of everyday tasks and actions as spiritual practices and her apologetic for offering everyday practices as a bridge to the growing 'spiritual-but-not-religious' community.

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G.W.M. is the sole author of this article.

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