

“The Simple Way”

A practical theology of new monasticism

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1. New monasticism

Inspired by the Iona tradition, a group of people in the northern part of the Netherlands, in the province of Friesland, tries to establish a monastic community embedded in the Frisian culture and identity. The project, called Nijkleaster, ‘New Convent’, started in 2009.¹ The neighboring Protestant congregation agreed to incorporate this project, and, in 2011, the ‘missionary and church growth’ department of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands made this project into one of their ‘protestant pioneer places’, supporting it with financial guarantees, guidance, and publicity.² The intention is to create something ‘new’, an alternative to the regular congregation. It will be a place of hospitality for pilgrims, and for people of different confessional traditions who do not feel at home in their own church or congregation, but also for spiritual seekers and those who perceive themselves as ‘solo-religious’.

The intention to start something ‘new’ might be slightly ambitious, compared to the already existing monastic communities in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, I regard this protestant Frisian project as an example of the search for a transformation of ecclesial tradition by reverting to older monastic practices. Monasticism has always been the reformation movement of Christianity, and as such the lifeline of the church. But nowadays we observe a growing interest in monastic practices in a part of the Christian world where we did not expect it: protestant evangelicalism. This interest manifests itself in what is called ‘new monasticism’, or ‘monasticism 2.0’.³ New monasticism is part of the emerging church movement of committed Christians recovering radical discipleship.⁴ This monasticism is not centered in a traditional monastery. Instead, its members settle down in abandoned sections of society, committing to community, sharing their income, serving the poor, and practicing spiritual disciplines. In all its diversity, this movement is characterized by twelve ‘marks of new monasti-

¹ hinnewagenaar.nl/nijkleaster/brochure-nijkleaster (February 2012).

² www.pkn.nl/missionair/info.aspx?page=16125 (March 2012).

³ See: www.missionconference.org/2011/monasticism-2-0: ‘Monasticism 2.0: un-pimping and remonking the church’ (March 2012).

⁴ Robert DOORNENBAL: *Crossroads. An exploration of the emerging-missional conversation with a special focus on ‘missional leadership’ and its challenges for theological education* (Dissertation Free University, Amsterdam) (Delft 2012).

cism'. It implies a form of radical Christianity, a radical reorientation to the root truths of Christian discipleship, within the local context.

The question this article tries to answer is what the potential might be of 'new monastic' communities in the changing of the religious landscape we are experiencing at present. I focus on one particular case of new monasticism, the Potter Street Community in Philadelphia USA, better known as The Simple Way community, founded by Shane Claiborne.⁵ According to their website, the people of The Simple Way, TSW for short, consider themselves to be "a web of subversive friends, conspiring to spread the vision of 'loving God, loving people, and following Jesus' in our neighborhoods and in our world", and "a movement of radical rebirth, grounded in God's love and drawing on the rich tradition of Christian practices that have long formed disciples in the simple way of Christ". Mark the words 'subversive', 'conspiring', and 'radical'. They present themselves as grassroot prophetic and ecumenical witnesses within the North American Church. TSW acknowledges its inspiration by, e.g., the Desert fathers and mothers, the Benedictine monastic tradition, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

2. Practical theological reflection

Reflecting on this case-study from a practical-theological perspective implies an understanding that weaves together empirical, practical, and theological threads. First, the empirical thread. Empirical means building an argument from the interpretation of data, i.e., recorded experiences, thoughts, and ideas. In this case, the data were TSW's products. These products included two books by Shane Claiborne,⁶ the newly published *Common prayer pocket edition*,⁷ a 'do it yourself' dvd,⁸ and the TSW website.⁹ Furthermore, I browsed the internet for references to Claiborne, and watched YouTube video's on TSW and Claiborne. The main question was what TSW's cultural products tell us about the transforming meaning of a concrete 'new monastic' community to being church in a post-modern culture.

⁵ I am grateful to my students who drew my attention to The Simple Way community and the work of Shane Claiborne. See also *Christianity Today*, September 2, 2005, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html (March 2012).

⁶ Shane CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution. Living as an ordinary radical* (Grand Rapids, MI 2006); IDEM & Chris HAW: *Jesus for president. Politics for ordinary radicals* (Designed by SharpSeven Design) (Grand Rapids, MI 2008).

⁷ Shane CLAIBORNE & Jonathan WILSON-HARTGROVE: *Common prayer pocket edition. A liturgy for ordinary radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI 2012). See also commonprayer.net (March 2012).

⁸ Shane CLAIBORNE et al.: *Another world is possible 3. Creation* (Philadelphia, The Simple Way).

⁹ www.thesimpleway.org (March 2012).

The designated way to study a culture, or a community, is by entering the field as a participant observer. In this case, however, my ethnographic approach did not involve meeting a group of people, observing their habits, and interviewing them about the meaning of their accounts, activities, and artifacts. So far, I have never been to Philadelphia, and I have no life experience with TSW. Nevertheless, it is possible to make at least some sense of this community by studying the available resources, i.e., TSW’s cultural products. Besides reading Claiborne’s books, I experimented with a kind of primitive ‘virtual ethnography’.¹⁰ It must be noticed, however, that I predominately focused on the content of TSW’s website, and not so much on the virtual communication via the social media (Facebook, Twitter, and RSS feeds), or on how TSW reconstructs social reality in cyberspace.¹¹ I ‘read’ the content (text, images, video’s) as one would read the content of a book, i.e., to find information about the thoughts and actions of a group or community. My prime interest was what they present on the internet about themselves, and about their ‘ecclesiology’, in addition to the books. In the future, it might be very interesting to combine, and compare a real life and a virtual ethnographic approach,¹² but that objective was beyond the scope of this article. As a consequence, the results of this qualitative empirical research on a new monasticism case can be no more than tentative and exploratory.

Second, the practical thread. My hermeneutical reflection is guided by the heuristic concept of a ‘practicing congregation’.¹³ Diana Butler Bass has devel-

¹⁰ Christine HINE: *Virtual ethnography* (London 2000). See also Daniel DOMÍNGUEZ FIGAREDO et al.: ‘Virtual ethnography’, on the: *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 8/3 (2007) (= nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703E19): “The label ‘virtual ethnography’ includes a broad range of methodological approaches aimed at answering the complexities of the object of research and the different ways in which this object has been constructed.”

¹¹ Heike MÓNika GRESCHKE: ‘Bin ich drin? – Methodologische Reflektionen zur ethnografischen Forschung in einem plurilokalen, computervermittelten Feld’, on the: *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 8/3 (2007) Art. 32 (= nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703321).

¹² For the methodological questions regarding observing an online community see Sladjana V. NORSEKOV & Morten RASK: ‘Observation of online communities. A discussion of online and offline observer roles in studying development, cooperation and coordination in an open source software environment’, on the: *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12/3 (2011) Art. 5

(= nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs110358). According to these authors re-search on virtual communities may benefit from combining offline and online methods of observation. See also Maurizio TELI et al.: ‘The internet as a library-of-people. For a cyberethnography of online groups’, on the: *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 8/3 (2007) Art. 33

(= nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703338), who write about ‘hybrid’ (virtual/actual) or ‘cyborg’ ethnography containing online as well as offline ethnography.

¹³ Diana BUTLER BASS: *The practicing congregation. Imagining a new old church* (Herndon 2004); IDEM: *Christianity for the rest of us. How the neighborhood church is transforming faith*

oped this concept while studying vital mainline Protestant congregations in the US, but it is also relevant for a Christian faith community like TSW. According to Butler Bass a ‘practicing’ congregation has “experienced renewed vitality through intentionally and creatively embracing one or more traditional Christian practices”.¹⁴ “Practicing congregations weave together Christian practices – activities drawn from the long Christian tradition – into a pattern of being church that forms an intentional way of life in community.”¹⁵ These communal practices explicitly refer to recovered tradition, which is employed to transform people in their post-modern existence from aimless nomads to intentional pilgrims. Practicing congregations, and communities I would say, successfully retrieve traditional practices, administering these as a habituation of Christian life.

Tradition is the continuous interpretation of discipleship, and therefore a dynamic concept. *Lived* tradition comprises imagination and creativity, but also chaos and conflict. Congregations, and Christian communities, that habituate this fluid retraditioning are trying to bridge the contexts of the ‘world’ and the church. In this respect, both congregations and monastic communities are places of habituation.¹⁶ They offer a space to practice faith that is concurrent with communal practices of early Christianity. Congregations, however, are different from monasteries in being perpetually and unavoidably open to ‘the world’,¹⁷

deeply embedded in very specific localities, where members live always elbow-to-elbow with nonmembers. They are much more porous than monasteries; the members, and the surrounding culture, seep in and out all the time, mixing the worlds of home, school, work, the media, a city and the congregation willy-nilly every day.

As we will see, in this respect the TSW community is more like a congregation than a convent. Nevertheless, the Philadelphian new monastics match the critical counterculture of the monastic communities. They live the monastic critique on consumerism and wastage, individualism and fragmentation, aimlessness and forgetfulness. As a ‘practicing community’ TSW is a ‘hybrid’ configuration.

Third, the theological thread. With Mary McClintock Fulkerson, I perceive practical theology as a ‘theology of the ordinary’: “a theological frame that will be adequate to the full-bodied reality” of lived faith, “capable of displaying its

(New York 2006); IDEM & Joseph STEWART-SICKING: *From nomads to pilgrims. Stories from practicing congregations* (Herndon 2006).

¹⁴ BUTLER BASS: *Christianity for the rest of us* 296.

¹⁵ BUTLER BASS: *The practicing congregation* 3.

¹⁶ Mary MCCLINTOCK FULKERSON: *Places of redemption. Theology for a worldly church* (Oxford 2007).

¹⁷ Dorothy C. BASS & Craig DYKSTRA: ‘Christian practices and congregational education in faith’, from the website *Resources for American Christianity*, www.resourcingchristianity.org (March 2012).

ambiguity, its implication in the banal and opaque realities of ordinary existence, even as it allows for testimony to God's redemptive reality"; "a theology that thematizes the complex and dense subject matter of contemporary situation".¹⁸ This sort of theology arises out of dilemmas or disjunctions, which Mary McClintock Fulkerson calls a 'generative wound'. Practices and situations are affected by sin, that needs to be transformed. Practical theologians read practices, and their situational context, from this transformational perspective. Faith is habituated and incorporated in practices as a form of social enculturation. These incorporated practices are bodily proprieties, reflecting the bodily, habitual response to God's relation with men. Practical theology is the 'habitus' to read, theologically, situations and practices, and to react on them and transform them in a creative and improvisational way.

To summarize my practical theological perspective, Christian communities habituate lived tradition in their practices. A new monastic community like The Simple Way is an example of retrieving ancient Christian practices with a future for Christianity in the changing religious landscape. Practical theology explores these embodied practices empirically, probing for their theological meaning and their potential to transform the world, of which the church is a part.

Next, I describe the milestones in the development of TSW as a new monastic community, with specific attention to their faith practices. In this description, I emphasize the importance of, what I call, 'practices of festivity'. In the final part of this article, I show the significance of new monasticism's practices and theology to the problems confronting Western European mainline churches. Furthermore, I suggest the theological meaning of how TSW holds the ancient monastic practices up as well as the value of pleasure and playfulness. I, tentatively, present the outlines of a practical theology of juxtaposition, referring to the work of Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Charles Taylor, and Harvey Cox.

3. Shane Claiborne

We learn about the community's beginnings from its (co-)founder's autobiographical notes. "I think my experiences have come to exemplify and caricature the struggles and ironies close to many of our hearts."¹⁹ Shane Claiborne (b. 1975) grew up in a United-Methodist family living in the Bible Belt, East Tennessee. He went to college in Philadelphia, at Eastern University, a university with an interdenominational student body, and affiliated with the mainline American Baptist Churches USA, member of the World Council of Churches. His final academic work Claiborne accomplished at the evangelical Wheaton College, close to Chicago. During his stay at Wheaton, he spent a year internship in Willow Creek Community Church. Before going to Willow, however,

¹⁸ MCCLINTOCK FULKERSON: *Places of redemption* 7.

¹⁹ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 27.

Claiborne stayed for three months at Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. Already in Philadelphia, in the summer of 1995, he came in contact with homeless families who were being evicted from an abandoned cathedral.²⁰ Claiborne and his college friends joined an organization of welfare rights advocates in their successful fight against the archdiocese and the local government. This watershed event became the motive to go to India. In 1997, Claiborne and five others began 'to conspire', forming a community northeast of Philadelphia's city-center. They rehabilitated some vacated houses in the heart of Kensington.²¹ Their ministry was 'loving God, loving people and following Jesus'; 'living out the gospel' and 'practicing resurrection'; 'doing small things with great deliberation'. In the nineteenth century, Kensington was one of the leading centers of the textile industry. Deindustrialization led to a significant population loss, high unemployment, economic decline, and the abandoning of homes in the neighborhood.²² A street corner less than one kilometer away was among the city's top 10 drug corners in 2007.²³ In 2003 Claiborne generated some media attention when he visited Baghdad as a member of a Christian peace-keeping team, shortly after US troops invaded Iraq. Claiborne has been called a 'punk activist' and a 'bulletproof monk',²⁴ a 'Christian hippie' or 'hipster',²⁵ and a peace activist.²⁶ In 2012, TSW's 'intentional community' consisted of 11 people living in three different homes.²⁷

²⁰ See also: www.citylimits.org/news/articles/2686/the-belles-of-st-edwards (March 2012).

²¹ See also: archives.citypaper.net/articles/2009/03/12/the-simple-way-kensington-philadelphia (March 2012).

²² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kensington,_Philadelphia,_Pennsylvania (March 2012).

²³ www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/cover-story/top_10_drug_corners-38426414.html (March 2012).

²⁴ Mark SCHONE: 'The real human shield', in *SPIN* 19/7 (July, 2003) 90-94; books.google.nl/books?id=NOHASap-qBoC&lpg=PA92&ots=rGORzNGWnw&dq=shane%20claiborne%20spin%20magazine&hl=nl&pg=PA92#v=onepage&q=shane%20claiborne%20spin%20magazine&f=true (March 2012). *SPIN* is a post-avant-garde music magazine.

²⁵ Brett MCCracken: *Hipster Christianity. When church and cool collide* (Grand Rapids, MI 2010);

books.google.nl/books?id=mCNXJo8LTMoC&pg=PA99&lpg=PA99&dq=christian+hippie+claiborne&source=bl&ots=c8P1S6Rkgu&sig=RT6MPaagye2Z-5zit-3oKFnyVDA&hl=nl&sa=X&ei=oidnT5eRAsmDOqD85YEI&ved=0CCYQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=christian%20hippie%20claiborne&f=false (March 2012).

²⁶ Melanie TUCKER: 'Leaving a large footprint. Shane Claiborne brings message of love, responsibility back home', in *The Daily Times* 1-7-2011; www.thedailytimes.com/Blount_Life/story/Leaving-a-large-footprint-Shane-Claiborne-brings-message-of-love-responsibility-back-home-id-013131 (March 2012).

²⁷ Potter street, where the Village House is located, is about 4 kilometers northwest of the Interstate Highway 95 and the Delaware River, the natural border between the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It is close to the junction of Kensington Avenue

4. New monastic practices

When we look at the activities of the TSW community, we certainly recognize 'ancient' contrast-cultural practices like hospitality, discernment, and worship.

In 2012 a 'pocket edition' of the Common Prayer book was published, with daily and occasional prayers, a table of scripture readings from Psalms and Scripture, and a table of special days, commemorating persons and events.²⁸ The community meets Monday to Friday at 8am to pray together.²⁹ On Sunday, they attend service at a neighborhood church.³⁰

Discernment is embedded in this daily worship. Being an intentional community of ordinary radicals demands a fair amount of discernment. Claiborne vividly describes in *Jesus for President* what the implications of new monasticism are for a Christian culture in the United States.

Above all, discernment is embodied in hospitality. TSW has a place where they accommodate visitors, and they offer an internship program. But their hospitality is principally visible in their living in the neighborhood. Each week they have a meal where everyone is welcome. Other activities are also intended for the neighborhood, like rehabilitating abandoned houses, making urban gardens, running a community thrift store, after-school programs, and food distribution. "We have a dream of a village in the middle of the urban desert – with a little cluster of row homes sprinkled about and a neighborhood where folks are committed to God and to each other."³¹

These core practices manifest themselves also in the themes of CONSP!RE, a magazine that "explores in a collaborative, creative, and corporate way some of the unique challenges of living out the gospel".³² The subtitle of the magazine is 'plotting goodness', and some of the themes were "sacred subversions", "prayer in an age of consumerism and distraction", "how to reshape your economic life to reflect the bounty of God", "redemption at broken places", "about grit, grace, and balance – a conversation of how we live unconventional choices over a lifetime".

However, what is at the heart of new monasticism is written down in the '12 marks of new monasticism'.³³ Practically all the marks are covered by the Bene-

and East Allegheny Avenue, a major transportation and retail hub in 'Harrowgate'. Harrowgate is primarily a low-income neighborhood, largely populated by Puerto Ricans, with also significant populations of Dominicans, African Americans, and Irish. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowgate,_Philadelphia,_Pennsylvania (March 2012).

²⁸ CLAIBORNE & WILSON-HARTGROVE: *Common prayer pocket edition*.

²⁹ Evening prayer sample video: vimeo.com/27882350 (March 2012).

³⁰ circleofhope.net (March 2012).

³¹ www.thesimpleway.org/local (March 2012).

³² conspiremag.com (March 2012).

³³ www.thesimpleway.org/about/12-marks-of-new-monasticism (March 2012). See also: www.newmonasticism.org/about.php (March 2012), and THE RUTBA HOUSE (ed.): *School(s) for conversion. 12 marks of a new monasticism* (Eugene 2005).

dictine vows of ‘stability’,³⁴ ‘conversion of manners’,³⁵ and ‘obedience’.³⁶ The first mark, ‘Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire’, is probably the only main difference with regular monastic life. TSW community intentionally located themselves in a place that was abandoned by the industrial and financial powers. There are, and always have been, other small urban communities, living in the midst of the world. But the new monastics of TSW might be different in challenging ‘the Empire’, ideologically and practically. ‘Empire’ stands for the powers and principalities that St. Augustine recognized in the Roman empire, and this new monastic movement in ‘the system’, symbolized in the *Pax Americana*. Our daily choices are framed by globalization, the market economy, and the (instigated) fear of terrorism and violence. Instead of withdrawing from the world, new monasticism calls on these powers and faces them. The first of the twelve marks sets the stage for a culture of prayer, simplicity, and grace, that in itself is an embodied political statement.

5. Politics

TSW is a truly ecumenical witness. It bridges the creed of Nicene and the Magna Charta of the poor (Matthew 25:31-46), evangelicalism and liberalism, contemplation and activism, obedience and subordination. “Just as it is important not to compromise core doctrines of our faith like the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is also important not to compromise the core practices of our faith like non-violence and enemy love.”³⁷ New monastics want to be radicals, going to the root of things. However, they are not saints or martyrs, what makes the adjective ‘ordinary’ appropriate. Claiborne objects to labeling the movement. “I

³⁴ Geographical proximity to other members, care for God’s earth and the local economy.

³⁵ Sharing economic resources with the needy, hospitality to strangers, just reconciliation, peacemaking.

³⁶ Humble submission to the church, intentional formation along the lines of the old novitiate, nurturing life in the intentional community, support for celibate singles, a disciplined contemplative life. When it comes to obedience, the abbot is an important figure in the Benedictine Rule. TSW has a board of directors, with a chair. Claiborne, as co-founder, is the visionary officer, and as such member of the board. Next to the board members, there are executive administrators for the different projects, and also a few coordinators for website support and accountancy, volunteer work, hospitality, and communications. But the website does not give any further information on the organization, its financial accountability, and the daily leadership structure. In the F(requently)A(sked)Q(uestion) section we can only learn that TSW is a non-profit organization and that most of the residents work part-time jobs. The executive officer and treasurer seems to be the organization’s leader.

See: msainfo.us/2012/01/24/what-are-new-possibilities-for-community-in-times-like-these (March 2012).

³⁷ www.thesimpleway.org/about/faq.

don't really fit into the old liberal-conservative boxes, so it's a good thing we are moving on to something new."³⁸ What he presents in his books gives the impression of 'a generous orthodoxy'.³⁹ His friends are progressive evangelicals. Like Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and John M. Perkins. Wallis is the founder and director of the Sojourners.⁴⁰ Claiborne calls him 'a friend and coconspirator', and writes frequently at Wallis' blog 'God's politics'.⁴¹ Campolo was Claiborne's Sociology teacher at Eastern University, and the founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, an organization that combines evangelism and social justice.⁴² Claiborne also contributes to Campolo's blog 'Red Letter Christians'.⁴³ Perkins is a civil rights activist and founder of an organization "dedicated to seeing the gospel of Jesus Christ restore entire communities".⁴⁴ Claiborne perceives Perkins as his spiritual father.

In *The irresistible revolution* and in *Jesus for president*, the authors present the politics of the cross and the kingdom of God, as a social alternative,⁴⁵ against nationalism, civil religion, global dominance, the influence of the military industrial complex, environmental pollution, consumer culture, the exploitation of migrant workers and cheap (child) laborers in foreign countries. Against these politics of the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12), new monasticism proposes a contrast culture, that exists of practices like vagrant campaigning, making ugly things beautiful ('practicing resurrection'), make your own stuff, practicing forgiveness, peacemaking, practicing revolutionary patience, revolutionary subordination, alternative economics, relational tithe.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, these 'practices of politics' are intentionally located at the abandoned places of empire.

³⁸ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 20.

³⁹ This term is coined by Hans Frei, in order to move beyond the liberal/conservative impasse. Brian McLaren, however, made it the title of one of his books, Brian McLAREN: *A generous orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI 2004). McLaren gave his book the following subtitle: 'why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poet, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian'.

⁴⁰ sojo.net (March 2012).

⁴¹ sojo.net/biography/shane-claiborne (March 2012).

⁴² www.eape.org/index.php (March 2012).

⁴³ www.redletterchristians.org/author/shane-claiborne-2-2 (March 2012).

⁴⁴ www.jmpf.org/content and www.cca.org/index.php (March 2012).

⁴⁵ Referring among others to the contrast culture ideas of Stanley HAUERWAS: *Resident aliens* (Nashville 1995).

⁴⁶ CLAIBORNE & HAW: *Jesus for president* 242-335.

6. Play and creativity

Practices of politics often involve ‘practices of festivity’ in new monasticism. They are definitely not the same, but it is interesting to see how new monastics juggle with the festive and politics. This playfulness makes politics less grim. The juxtaposition of the festive with politics reminds us of the prophets’ humor. Like Jeremiah placing a yoke on his neck, and Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey’s back. Claiborne writes and talks about the irresistible revolution that laughs. We need prophets who laugh and dance. Approvingly, he quotes the anarchist writer Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance, then it is not my revolution.” The Jesus movement is a revolution that dances, because celebration is at the very core of the kingdom.⁴⁷

TSW’s ‘foundation’ comprises the principles they practice, like simplicity, desire for spirituality, ending poverty, wholeness, but also ‘the creative and performing arts’, and ‘play’.⁴⁸ Creativity is an important asset of TSW. It shows itself in the make-up and the content of the website,⁴⁹ in the ‘alternative’ design of the book *Jesus for president*, in the murals they make on neighborhood walls,⁵⁰ in the creation of a neighborhood park in the midst of the concrete jungle,⁵¹ but also in how they draw the attention of local government and the media with social actions for immigrant workers,⁵² homeless people,⁵³ and the poor.⁵⁴

We recognize that we are created Imago Dei to be creators. Each individual has unique and special creative abilities that add to communal ‘art’. Also, we value the role that art has in breaking the cycle of poverty and liberating emotional and spiritual deprivation.

All this may sound a bit like ‘the sixties’, but the way TSW arranges itself as an emergent network of networks, making creatively use of videos, social media, and popular music, puts them right into the second decade in the twenty hundreds. Claiborne’s collective was not even born in the 1960s. Nevertheless,

⁴⁷ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 310-314.

⁴⁸ www.thesimpleway.org/about/foundation (March 2012).

⁴⁹ The lay-out and the accessibility of the website are attractive to an audience in their twenties and thirties. It is a source for information on their past – www.thesimpleway.org/about/archive (March 2012) – and current projects and actions, and their foundations and vision.

⁵⁰ www.thesimpleway.org/index.php/about/archive/we-have-a-new-mural (March 2012).

⁵¹ www.thesimpleway.org/local/greenspace (March 2012).

⁵² www.thesimpleway.org/index.php/about/archive/walk-a-mile-in-our-shoes (March 2012).

⁵³ www.thesimpleway.org/index.php/about/archive/philadelphias-new-food-sharing-ordinance (March 2012).

⁵⁴ sojo.net/blogs/2011/10/27/moving-money-investing-new-world (March 2012).

there is a reminiscence to the 1960s in the importance of humor, fun, play, and not taking oneself too serious.

Creativity goes hand in hand with the principle of playfulness. In TSW they know how to play. “The community is committed to playing ... creating foolishness as we dance together; never forgetting to cry and always remembering to laugh.” Humor, foolishness, and laughing are contagious components of TSW’s festive practices. Claiborne refers to 1 Corinthians 1:27, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”(TNIV) That is God’s humor.⁵⁵

In college, Claiborne was part of a clown troupe, and for a while he wanted to join the circus.⁵⁶

I went to circus school and became quite an accomplished unicycler, juggler, stilt-walker, fire-breather, and fire-eater, although I never ended up joining the circus. Of course, now I know that working with the church is close enough, its own kind of circus, packed full of fools, freaks, and daredevils.

On YouTube, there is an interview with Claiborne made during the break of a conference in Princeton, where he gave a workshop on ‘circus theology’.⁵⁷ All through the interview he juggles with a friend. “You can get in a room and talk theology, but if you can’t juggle together, what good is it?”, he says. Faith is all about “people showing something more beautiful than what was already there.” In the interview, he tells about a protest march of immigrant workers, who demonstrated against Taco Bell and Burger Kings because of underpayment, dressed up as peppers and tomatoes. He calls it ‘Not protesting but protestifying’. Not being against something, but showing what things could look like, like Jesus who was talking about another kingdom.

In another interview on YouTube, he discloses they have a theology of the circus.⁵⁸ Jesus was doing theological stunts. Claiborne refers to the miracles and parables of Jesus, like money in the mouth of the fish, riding the donkey in the Passover, and ‘resurrection, probably the greatest stunt there ever was’. This theology stresses the importance of ‘laughing at death’, not living in fear. “I Learned more about God from the tears of homeless mothers than any systematic theology ever taught me.”⁵⁹

Surveying TSW’s practices, we discover a generation of generous orthodox Christians in their thirties, who seem to practice what they preach. What they embody is a retrieval of monastic practices, inspired by the different renewal and reformation movements in the history of Christianity. They combine ancient Christian practices with a postmodern countercultural lifestyle, and an

⁵⁵ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 19.

⁵⁶ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 42.

⁵⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLmdxGlcgVE (March 2012).

⁵⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcB_2BLXcaM& (March 2012).

⁵⁹ CLAIBORNE: *The irresistible revolution* 51.

intelligent use of the internet and social media. General practices like worship and formation, are radically intertwined with practices of politics, and, especially, with practices of festivity. In the concluding part of this article, I borrow some thoughts of Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Charles Taylor, and Harvey Cox, trying to discern the theological meaning of new monasticism and the festive.

7. Habituated practices

As theology of ‘the ordinary’ practical theology can be perceived as a theology of the quotidian. Practical theology is the systematic reflection on the meaning of faith in daily life, a hermeneutics of lived faith, reading situated and embodied practices from a transformational perspective. With regard to the theological meaning of habituated practices and tradition, first, some observations by McClintock Fulkerson; second, some reasoning by Taylor on the importance of the festive and the phenomenon of exarnation; third, Cox on the notion of the festive and a theology of juxtaposition.

In her book *Places of redemption*, McClintock Fulkerson distinguishes four different practices that make a congregation a faithful place: formation, worship, interpretive practices, and homemaking practices. The interesting ones are the ‘homemaking practices’,⁶⁰ because they are not warranted by ecclesial tradition. Practices to maintain and sustain the community (‘homemaking’) are ‘traditions that do not have a name’. The formation of identity, worship and interpreting scripture for our daily lives, are practices constituted by tradition. That is not the case with, e.g., cooking and eating, cleaning and janitorial activities, storytelling and mutual support, raising money and participation in (women) groups. Mostly these practices are performed by women, or people with a lower status within the church. McClintock Fulkerson makes a point in claiming these practices as part of ecclesial tradition. They differ from ‘inscribed’ practices, prescribed by tradition, like worship, bible study, and religious education. But still, these homemaking practices communicate the essence of community. They help the congregation to incorporate the practices of faith.

Referring to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* concept, McClintock Fulkerson perceives tradition as not only comprised of (cognitive) practices of inscription, but also by affectively and situational rich and embodied practices. The habituation in Christian faith is always accompanied by bodily habituation, a corporeal knowledge.⁶¹ Homemaking practices do deserve to be recognized as habituating, transforming practices. They are part of normative tradition, because they express care and responsibility, and contribute to a more wholesome

⁶⁰ MCCLINTOCK FULKERSON: *Places of redemption* 131-133.

⁶¹ MCCLINTOCK FULKERSON: *Places of redemption* 32-52.

dealing with differences and being different. That is also what makes a congregation a faithful place of God.

Using the concept of 'habitus' and 'habituation' helps to understand that tradition is not only driven by historical content handed over as a set of normative rules. Tradition implies identity as well as flexibility. It is regulated improvisation. Tradition is the productive and creative competence of drawing from inscribed traditions and reconfiguring them to new situations and circumstances in a performed bodily way of communicating.

Building on this notion of practices as habituated performances of tradition, implies two things. First, McClintock Fulkerson's analysis not only applies to local congregations, but also to localized and contextualized Christian communities, like TSW, that engage in practices of homemaking. Second, it is compulsory to extend the number of practices that make a faithful place of God, when we reflect on the TSW case. We need to consider the new monastic practices of 'politics', and especially those of 'festivity', as two distinctive practices that are pivotal to being church in the postmodern, changing religious landscape. We could learn from the ecclesial importance of creativity, playfulness, and laughter, in juxtaposition with politics, contemplation, and the countercultural life of sobriety. TSW's practices might help us to retrieve a balanced ratio of simplicity, prayer, and social activism, within the bearable lightness of the festive.

8. Excarnation and the festive

For the meaning of the festive, and the detrimental development of the 'excarnation' of Christianity, I borrow from Taylor's *A secular age*.⁶² Referring to Victor Turner's notion of the essential play between structure and anti-structure, i.e., the complementarity of established order and the outbreaks of *communitas* in moments of reversal or transgression, Taylor underlines the necessity of an equilibrium in tension between human flourishing and (self-) transcendence. Life in the quotidian is based on stability and predictability. We get up in the morning, get dressed, go to work, have dinner with people we know, and sleep under the same roof as the day before. But that is not all there is to life. We long, we dream, we phantasize. We want, we chase, we pursue. We reach out, we have faith, we believe. In short, we transcend ourselves, one way or another. Life consists of the mutual necessity of opposites, antithetical states, or juxtapositions. That is the meaning of carnival, according to Turner, and of Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage. Taylor broadens Turner's theory to include 'the festive'. Defined as moments of fusion in a common action or feeling, which wrench us out of the quotidian routine, and put us in touch with the sacred, or something exceptional, beyond ourselves,⁶³ Taylor identifies 'the festive' as a

⁶² Charles TAYLOR: *A secular age* (Cambridge 2007).

⁶³ TAYLOR: *A secular age* 469, 482, 516-517.

crucial dimension of contemporary religious life. In general, the festive is a niche in our world, “where the (putatively) transcendent can erupt into our lives, however well we have organized them around immanent understandings of order”,⁶⁴ especially in religious practices. Taylor points at the community of Taizé, and pilgrimage, as examples of such a departure of the everyday to come in contact with something greater.

Taylor has every reason to be critical of what he calls the ‘excarnation’ of official Christianity, the transfer out of embodied, ‘enfleshed’ forms of religiosity, into those which are more ‘in the head’. He holds the Reformation responsible for ‘civilizing’ and disciplining the lives of the faithful, and their popular religious practices, among which Taylor counts festivities like carnival. He advocates resisting this excarnation by finding⁶⁵

new forms of collective ritual; rites of passage; individual and small group discipline of prayer, fasting, and devotion; modes of marking time; new ways of living conjugal sexual life; and new works of sharing and healing, which could give bodily and at times public expression to the worship of God.

Besides the use of descriptive language, faith and religious life should reclaim the vitality of bodily habitus and mimicry, as well as the symbolic expression in art, poetry and music, and dance, according to Taylor.

TSW’s intentional practices can be perceived as an example of Taylor’s resistance to excarnation. The ‘marks of new monasticism’, as well as the empirical practices of hospitality, discernment, and worship, are testimony to the formation of ‘ancient-new’ collective rituals. To these incarnational practices, TSW adds the celebration of beauty, laughter, and imagination, in practicing art, gardening, and juggling; practices of festivity, in short. Practices that are capable of reversing the excarnation of Christianity and embodying faith in a credible way of life. That is what we need in engaging cross-pressured individuals that have not given up on the realization of fullness. According to Taylor we need to enlarge our palette of such points of contact with fullness as possible itineraries to faith in God.⁶⁶ The new monastics of TSW take the lead in one of those itineraries.

9. Circus theology

There is not much information on TSW’s ‘circus theology’ available. I even doubt if they really do have a formalized ‘theology of the circus’. Nevertheless, in their key reference they make an explicit connection with the lay theologian and radical Christian (and lawyer, and social activist) William Stringfellow (1928-

⁶⁴ TAYLOR: *A secular age* 518.

⁶⁵ TAYLOR: *A secular age* 613.

⁶⁶ TAYLOR: *A secular age* 728-772.

1985), a connoisseur of the circus.⁶⁷ Stringfellow imaged the church as a circus and carnival, in a positive sense. He even pictured the circus, in its magnitude, versatility and logistics, as a parable of the kingdom:⁶⁸

... the circus is among the few coherent images of the eschatological realm to which people still have ready access, and that the circus thereby affords some elementary insights into the idea of society as a consummate event. This principality, this art, this veritable liturgy, this common enterprise of multifarious creatures called the circus, enacts a hope, in an immediate and historic sense, and simultaneously embodies an ecumenical foresight of radical and wondrous splendor, encompassing, as it does both empirically and symbolically, the scope and diversity of Creation.

In the circus, humans, freed from the consignment to death, confront the ‘beast’. Stringfellow was drawn to the itinerant life of the circus people. He, and his life partner, even spent a summer sojourning with the circus. “The church would likely be more faithful if the church were similarly nomadic.”⁶⁹

Circus theology might be understood as an example of a ‘theology of juxtaposition’, a genitive theology coined by Harvey Cox in his 1969 theological essay *Feast of fools*.⁷⁰ Although ‘juxtaposition’ and ‘juggling’ have a different etymological derivative,⁷¹ there is a resemblance of sound. In the same way, there is a difference but also much similarity between TSW’s circus theology and the theological method that Cox paints in rather broad strokes. Liberal theologian Cox, avant-gardistically, dares to stage Christ as harlequin. Claiborne talks about juggling, playing, and laughing, and the followers of Jesus as jesters. And although he does not refrain from advocating ‘Jesus for president’, it might be a different thing calling Jesus a clown. On the other hand, Claiborne’s theology of play, dance, and creativity thickens when we read it from Cox’ theology of juxtaposition. The juggling monastic, the praying activist, the dancing revolutionary, the laughing dare-devil, like Claiborne, is the one who transforms protestant tradition in transitory times by juxtaposing vital elements of tradition with popular, festive culture.

⁶⁷ CLAIBORNE et al.: *Another world is possible*.

⁶⁸ Bill Wylie KELLERMANN (ed.): *A keeper of the word. Selected writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids, MI 1994);

books.google.co.uk/books?id=TXqhaShL_icC&printsec=frontcover&dq=william+stringfellow&hl=nl&sa=X&ei=EZoT4bnJsvtOYfRoKkK&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=circus&f=false (March 2012).

⁶⁹ KELLERMANN: *A keeper of the word*.

⁷⁰ Harvey G. COX: *The feast of fools. A theological essay on festivity and fantasy* (= William Belden Noble Lectures) (Cambridge 1969).

⁷¹ ‘Juggle’ is derived from the Latin *ioculari*, meaning ‘to jest, to make fun of’, and *iocus*, meaning ‘joke’. The ‘juxta’ in ‘juxtaposition’ evolved from the Latin *iuxta*, which is a contraction of *ingista*, which stems from *ingum*, meaning ‘yoke’ and *iungere*, ‘to join’.

Writing about juxtaposition, Harvey Cox refers to the surrealistic collage-technique, bringing things together that did not belong together at first. Because of the contrast with daily life juxtaposition is one of the three constituents of festivity. As a contrast, or as 'anti-structure' as Turner would say, the festive is meaningful. Cox reminds us of the importance of difference in its own right. The 'theology of juxtaposition' is a theological method of exposing the tensions and fractures between different elements. We now label this kind of theology as 'hybrid', or 'bricolage', or even 'emergent', but more than forty years ago Cox used 'juxtaposition' to question the self-evidence of untimely harmony and continuity. As a theological method, the theology of juxtaposition focuses on confusion, contradiction, and challenges, experimenting with creative 'conflict' and discontinuity. It is about undermining existing social structures by intentionally encouraging 'chaos'. This disorder, however, points in the direction of a new order.

Accentuating disproportion is also the principle of comedy. Referring to this correspondence, Cox argues the comic dimension of Christian faith. Christ is victim and victor. At the cross, he unmasks the principalities and powers. That is why Dante could picture life within God's parameters as a 'divine comedy'.

Obviously, calling Christ the incarnation of the festive has political implications. "You cannot expect jester's theology from the archbishop's palace."⁷² The jester remains an outsider. He lives in society, but will never belong to it.

I believe this means for our time a reappropriation of the radical utopian, sectarian and monastic impulses in Christianity. It means a rediscovery of styles of Christian life and images of Christ that in recent years have nearly been forgotten. But here again, the life of the spirit is ahead of the theologians. The modern equivalent of monastic communities have already begun to appear in today's communes and co-ops. And the image of Christ as the jester has begun to appear.⁷³

Cox' theological method of juxtaposition helps to understand the theological meaning of new monasticism and Claiborne's embodied circus practices to a fragmented and disembedded society. The purpose of dancing, clowning, and making ugly things beautiful, juxtaposed with social activism and a monastic lifestyle, is progressing the church beyond the multiple dead end streets it ended up in Western Europe. Many congregations and parishes in Western Europe are torn between 'tent' and 'temple', being missional or complacent, mainstream or counter-culture, accentuating personal faith or social activism, individualized spirituality or communal worship. These ecclesial-cultural fractures threaten to paralyze us, extending to death. We need to progress beyond these alienating dissensions. The theological method of juxtaposition, habituated and embodied in clowning and dancing, might point us in the right direction.

⁷² COX: *The feast of fools* 137.

⁷³ COX: *The feast of fools* 138.

10. The Simple Way

Although TSW is a small, local community of 'generous orthodox' Christians, by its presence on the internet, Claiborne's books, and the publicity he generates, it has become a global example of new monasticism. When young, protestant evangelicals, surfing the web for truthful models of Christian discipleship, encounter Shane Claiborne making his own clothes, and TSW gifting school supplies to hundreds of neighborhood kids, they will learn about the ancient communal practices of stability, conversion, and obedience to the simple way of Christ presented as a post-modern alternative lifestyle that is both challenging and fun.

The aim of this article was to give an explorative impression of a case of new monasticism. Furthermore, I wanted to show that TSW's practices are concurrent with the contemporary religious interest in habituation, embodiment, and the festive. Finally, this case study demonstrates how appropriate a theological method of juxtaposition and a practical theology of the quotidian are for interpreting a creative application of ancient Christian practices in a changing religious landscape which is profoundly confusing mainline churches.

A new monastic community is neither a convent nor a congregation. It is a hybrid community, a mixture of a global network of people with an alternative Christian lifestyle, a local community of faith, a political pressure group, and a group of neighborhood community workers. As such it represents a viable Christian presence in our societies. 'Old' monastic communities, with their silence, regular hours, and ascetic way of life, will always preserve their attraction for spiritual seekers looking for a life changing experience, or just a retreat. But these new monasticists might be more interesting to a younger generation of social media savvy Christians caught up in every day's excitement, trying to live a meaningful life amidst the economic crisis, the climate change and the disappearing future of our welfare state. It might be that simple.

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