
“Where Can We Find Ourselves?” Homelessness, Spirituality, and the Question of God

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This article asks what spirituality is like for young adults living on the streets of Seattle. It is based on more than five years of ethnographic fieldwork and is, as J. Derrick Lemons put it, “a theologically engaged anthropology” (Lemons, 2018). I demonstrate that, on the streets, spirituality is about cultivating a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world; tending the social wounds penetrating people soul deep; and connecting to *Something* that offers a power and purpose for living—while rejecting what is experientially otherwise. This article also demonstrates that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate on the streets because of the unloving social conditions that homelessness exemplifies. With the disappointments and possibilities of Christian love in mind, I conclude by imagining a new classroom within the school of Christian anthropology that (i) archives diverse practices of Christian love throughout space and time and (ii) cocreates *agapeic ethnographies* to help transform the unloving social conditions of everyday life.

“Where Can We Find Ourselves?”

I’d been looking for him. The last time I saw Apocalypse, he had found several love letters in a dumpster that were written from a prison cell.

“Apocalypse,” I say. “How are you?”

He asks if I know a quiet place where we can rest, be and be let be. “At this time of day,” he says, “I just want to disappear.”

I suggest Christ Our Hope. The church sits below an apartment complex for 240 people who used to be homeless. It was opened in 2010 to help people grow in faith, hope, and love.

We walk through a metropolitan cacophony, in evening light and soft rain, with his dog, Golden Boy.

I step into the church, walk past a baptismal fountain, and sit on a wooden pew. Apocalypse and Golden Boy remain outside. When you are homeless for a while, going inside is a risk that might not be worth taking.

I sit before a statue of Jesus. As I rest my gaze on Jesus’ face, I am overcome by the sound of a jackhammer digging into the black asphalt outside.

Apocalypse and Golden Boy enter the church. “Whoa,” he says. Apocalypse did not ask the church’s presence to wound him, but that is what happened.

Apocalypse looks at the fountain, the wooden pews, and the statue of Jesus. He sits down in the back of the church and leans against a marble wall. Golden Boy lies down beside him, sighs, and closes her eyes.

Apocalypse looks at Jesus—but then turns around and faces the marble.

“Funny,” he says, “how many different things they can be. I fell in love with almost each one of you.”

“I have a question,” he says. “Where can we find ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

Looking at me and then into the marble, at Jesus, and then into the marble, he says: “You may not know it, but we are pure soul.”

For a few minutes, I listen to a discourse—a kind of sermon from the back of the church, as I think of it now—about love and the spiritual nature of human personhood.

Apocalypse sits up and smiles. He is grounded. There is a peace about him.

“There is a Great Something here,” he says. His fingers caress the marble. He is intimate with what is

present. “It gave me a message.” Apocalypse says the Great Something told him to find four companions to help him find himself. He looks long at me and asks if I will be one of them. “But will the church allow it?”

“Go with Paul,” he tells Golden Boy. Golden Boy sits at my feet. She cushions her head against the wooden pew. Apocalypse leaves the church.

An hour later, I found him again. He was sitting down with his back against the wall of McDonald’s on Third Avenue. Before going home, before swimming in the lake, before cultivating spiritual freedom under water to understand and love what is different than me, I bought Apocalypse and Golden Boy a cheeseburger.

Figure 1
Reflection in the Marble



What’s Happening?

Apocalypse is a person I spent time with on the streets of Seattle. For more than five years, I conducted ethnographic research to understand what spirituality is like on the streets and what difference it makes for the young adults who live there. I spent day and night there—hanging out, listening, and practicing homelessness as someone who, up until the end of my research, wasn’t homeless. I found that everyday life on the streets is shaped by a conflicted network of federal, state, and local homeless service providers. I immersed myself in this network (which often is experienced as profit-driven, aloof, and uncaring by people who are homeless) and learned its practices and

perspectives. I drank coffee with service providers, attended and facilitated workshops, and volunteered as a Christian “street minister.” Between 2016-2019, I participated in an international team of theologians and social scientists studying faith-based responses to homelessness. Our purpose was to understand how religion matters in relation to homelessness—and we published the first volume on the subject (Costoya, 2021). In 2023, I received a Community Engaged Learning Faculty Fellowship at Seattle University. This fellowship afforded me the opportunity to learn how undergraduate students grapple with homelessness as they volunteered within the network of homeless services.

During my research, I wrote over 1,000 pages of fieldnotes, took hundreds of photographs, and transcribed nearly one hundred recorded interviews. Producing ethnographic insight *with* people who are homeless *about* spirituality was at stake. While spirituality had been explored in the anthropological study of homelessness before (Snow and Anderson, 1992; Liebow, 1993; Gowan, 2010), no ethnographic study had *centered* spirituality in the experiences of homelessness. I wanted to fill this gap in scholarly material about homelessness and spirituality. Inspired by applied anthropologists like Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Kim Hopper, and Tanya Marie Luhrmann, I also practiced ethnography to help reduce the unnecessary suffering that people who are homeless experience. At stake, for me, as a Christian, was a work of love that might efficaciously nurture diverse practices of love, Christian and otherwise, for people who live without homes.

I do not know what became of Apocalypse. I presume that he died by overdose or suicide, as this is a common end for street kids, though I hope otherwise. For me, Apocalypse is an archetype for the unhoused people that I spent time with. His life tells a common story about what everyday life is like on the streets, what differences spirituality makes there, and how people become homeless. Apocalypse is living on the streets of Seattle, which has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the United States. He is between 18-35. He despises religion—but practices diverse spiritualities that resonate with his experience in the world.

Apocalypse calls himself a “street kid” to distance himself from more stigmatized homeless populations (like elderly people living on the streets) and to name the cultures of resistance that unhoused youth create. The story about how Apocalypse began living on the

streets is complex. Any life story is fundamentally enigmatic, after all, and it is an epistemological violence to reduce human beings, who will always overflow our interpretive capacities, into fixed narratives (Levinas, 1961; Jordan, 2024). But what I learned about how street kids became homeless is consistent with what other homelessness researchers have found.

Before becoming homeless, Apocalypse's everyday existence—his “home world” as the late sociologist Peter Berger put it—was experientially uninhabitable (Berger, 1974). He couldn't stand to be inside himself. In childhood, he suffered devastating, repeated trauma (Coats and McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). At school, Apocalypse bore “enduring bullying” (Tyler and Schmitz, 2018). In his struggle to cope with the abuses that marred his life, Apocalypse's personal relationships fractured—and then his support system totally collapsed (Hopper, 2014). The limited employment opportunities that were available to Apocalypse didn't pay enough to support the cost of living (Goldstone, 2025). The shelters that he might have slept in were, for him, unsafe and dehumanizing—and would not allow his last loving attachment to the world, Golden Boy, to be inside with him (Donley and Wright, 2012). In this experiential uninhabitability of his everyday life, the streets allured Apocalypse (Janus, 1995). They offered a like-minded community (Smith, 2018), the freedom to be let be (Zigon, 2018), and enough humanitarian services to survive (Duneier, 2000). Apocalypse told me that he experienced home for the first time when he became homeless. He also told me that the home he found on the streets will eventually kill him—and that, in the winter months, when it's dangerous to sleep outside, he smokes meth to keep warm and would rather live in jail.

On the streets, Apocalypse tells me, he is treated by other people like a social cancer, and troubled by a seemingly failed promise of a personally loving God. He doesn't have access to adequate food, health care, and housing. He sees, from behind his cardboard sign, as materially wealthy individuals throw away expensive food, receive life-saving medical care, and host cocktail parties on their balconies. He makes friends on the streets that seem like family—until they bash his head with a baseball bat for the cell phone in his pocket. The police don't seem to care. He is terribly alone and yet leery of social contact. Apocalypse walks the streets wondering when to kill himself. He fears the world within and tries not to close his eyes. The President of the United States describes him as a violent

insurrectionist polluting business and beauty (Trump, 2024). The Supreme Court, in 2024, ruled that he can be criminalized for sleeping outside. Apocalypse has come to think of himself as the enemy, the enemy. He says to himself and the ethnographer: “I cannot trust anyone on the streets, not even myself.”

Remarkably, Apocalypse's pursuit of ultimate meaning, belonging, and love has not ceased. As Viktor Frankl observed, this pursuit, which we name “spirituality,” is intrinsic to human personhood (Frankl, 2000). I found that, on the streets, spirituality is a fraught practice of trying to cultivate a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world. It is the pursuit of a presence that might tend the social wounds penetrating your soul deep. A simple “hello, how are you?” may be salvific balm. Or it could damn you into a paralyzing remembrance of your misery. You align yourself with a spiritual force you call “The Universe” to “manifest” (or make present) survival items in a dumpster. Like a handwritten wish for love from a prison cell—or an illegal substance that keeps you from freezing at night but may be laced with something that kills you. You reject a religious force that you think is rejecting you to experience one that may accept you. You listen for a “Great Something” with your back against the wall. You live wounded by love's absences. You wander the world in search of yourself and then, when you are too tired to move, and yet you cannot sleep, you sit down and hope against hope for a crumb of the economy. This crumb teaches you that maybe your life is still worth living and that *Something* is keeping you around for a purpose.

The purpose of this article is to describe how street kids in Seattle think about that *Something*—and what differences that thinking makes. The anthropological literature on homelessness has consistently shown that God concepts can be a consequential dimension in the experiences of homelessness—for good and ill. They may help an unhoused individual salvage their identity (Snow and Anderson, 1993) and experience a subtle but nevertheless transformative nurturance to help them get through another day, lest they otherwise kill themselves (Liebow, 1995; Dunlap, 2021). God concepts may also lead someone to blame themselves for their homelessness, ignore the structural causes of homelessness, and exacerbate mental unhealth (Gowan, 2010; Stivers, 2011). In this article, I will show that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate for young adults living on the streets of Seattle because of the wounding, unloving social conditions they experience. I will also show that the God concepts

street kids do experience—usually either (a) a negligent *Something* or (b) an abstract, higher power within—helps them sustain a purpose and power for living. I conclude this article with a proposal for the school of Christian anthropology, based on my finding about the experiential failures of Christian love, that might be of genuine service to the public. I encourage Christian anthropologists to (a) develop an archive on Christian love practices throughout time and place; and (b) cocreate *agapeic ethnographies* that might help the world better understand and transform the unloving social conditions of everyday life.

Letters to God

When I arrived in Seattle, I began collecting letters to God on a yellow notepad. “Hello,” I would say. “I am doing research on how people experience God on the streets. Would you like to write a letter to God?” In exchange for a letter, I would offer cheap cigarettes. I wanted a letter to God from everyone who was homeless in Seattle, even if they didn’t believe in God. In addition to deepening the study of homelessness, I reasoned that ethnographic insight about how people experience God might unveil further, unrecognized dimensions of social life. The way people think about and relate to God has been proved to be one of the most consequential influences on human persons (Froese and Bader, 2010). Max Weber, a founding figure of sociology, for example, argued that the anxiety-inducing, disciplinarian God of the early Protestant imagination produced the spark that lit modern capitalism aflame (Weber, 2001). For Sigmund Freud, a founding figure of psychoanalysis, God was a malady that the modern mind needed to be cured from (Freud, 1989). Martin Luther King, Jr. helped build a political movement to institutionalize black civil rights through his conception of a loving, socially liberative God (King, 1958). And more recently, the historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez has demonstrated that white evangelical nationalists legitimate their quest for political power through a hypermasculine, cowboy-like image of God (Du Mez, 2020).

One afternoon on “the Ave” in Seattle’s University District, in front of an abandoned clothing store, a group of street kids rejected my offer. They didn’t want to write a letter to God, not even for cheap cigarettes. The practice was anathema, and even laughable, because it seemed too Christian. Many of the street kids I spent time with, I came to learn, hate

Christianity. Several referred to themselves as “Satanist” or “Luciferian.” They would say “fuck you” to Christianity. Initially, it wounded me to hear street kids speak negatively about something that is precious within me. I judged them hastily and harshly. But, with time, their “fuck you” to Christianity became for me, a long and open ethnographic query. Though not without pain, I came to understand their rejection of Christianity as a potentially lifesaving (but not unproblematic) spiritual practice that helped tend the social wounds penetrating them soul deep (Blankenship-Lai 2025).

I put my yellow notepad away. I stopped asking for letters to God. Instead, I’d say, “Hello and how are you?” I’d listen deeply and hang out for long hours. I’d get to know someone living homeless before asking them to become information for my research. I tried to do an ethnography about spirituality *with* them, not *on* them (Ingold, 2018). I wanted to be a good, trustworthy presence in their experience of the world—even though I knew I would sometimes fail and, like every ethnographer, need mercy. After getting to know them, perhaps over coffee or a meal, I’d ask someone living homeless to talk about how they experience God. With the compassion and nonjudgement that I had access to, I would listen, ask follow-up questions, and stay around.

This is what I heard. I encourage you to read the stories below slowly.

December grew up in a small town in the Midwest. She said the Christian church that claimed to love her harassed her for being gay. December got on a bus for Seattle when she felt her life at risk. Seattle, she thought, would help free her from violence and allow her to be herself. December told me that, today, she isn’t sure if God exists. “I have thought a lot about this,” she said. We were sitting on the sidewalk. Our backs were against the glass doors of an abandoned Radio Shack. In purple and yellow and blue and red, she was drawing “Fuck the Ave” into her sketch pad. “There must be *Something* out there,” she said. “How could all of this come from nothing?” “But,” she went on, “it seems cruel to let people know that you are real, but then allow them to experience so much suffering. If *Something* exists,” she said, “then maybe it’s an alien in the seventh grade who created us for his science fair project. Now he hasn’t seen it—he hasn’t seen us—in eons. It’s like we are collecting dust in his parents’ attic.”

Found, one of the first street kids I spent time with, created, as we spoke about God, an insightful link

between an abstract creator and human purpose. He showed me an open wound on his foot. We had been playing his guitar near Pike Place Market. As I strummed his guitar strings, Found told me that he is afraid to go to the hospital. He said he is worried that a doctor will look at his wound and say his leg needs to be amputated. "That will kill me," Found said. "I can't be homeless without legs." Found told me he is worried that the doctors will judge him and "not do shit for me anyway since I am homeless." When I asked Found about God, he became animated. I could tell, by attending to his body language, that the question really mattered to him. "I don't know what it is," he said, "but *Something* is keeping me around for a purpose." Found told me a story to illustrate the point. One night, he said, he went to sleep in a dumpster. He said it was raining, that he was "hella dope sick," and that the dumpster seemed like the safest place to sleep. The next morning, he woke up to the dumpster being picked up by a dump truck. He screamed and clawed and, somehow, he got out of the dumpster. That he got out in time, Found said, was a miracle. In his mind, it is evidence that *Something* is keeping him around for a purpose. While he thinks *Something* is keeping him around for an undisclosed purpose, Found sometimes wonders if *Something* is pulling a cruel joke on him. "Look around," he said.

Samantha prays, she said, but she isn't sure what she prays to. "I don't consider it a god," she said. "It is not like a person." Samantha tells me that she isn't sure "how the world was created and all of that. I do have a higher power, though," she said. "It's a really strong force." Samantha said she is open to her higher power being anything other than "a man in the clouds." What she knows for certain is that her higher power is kind. And good. That it cares for her. Samantha believes her higher power helps when she is dope sick, when she needs money to "get well," and when she is about to give up. She thinks that her higher power guides her life. Samantha told me that a "preacher man" once offered her a free hotel room while she was "flying a sign" in front of an ice cream shop. "He said he wanted to show me how much God loves me," she said. At first, Samantha didn't trust the preacher man. She feared that, in truth, he was a sex trafficker. "Something in my gut told me it'd be okay, though, and that I could trust him." Samantha said she is glad she took the offer. "I hadn't slept that well in a year," she said.

A few street kids didn't want to talk about God. For some, God just didn't matter much. "Total bullshit," Skate told me when we sat down for coffee

on the Ave. When I asked him to elaborate, he just said it again: "total bullshit." For others, the question of God posed a serious mental health risk. Rage, who was "on the run" from the police for "selling a lot of drugs and really, really hurting someone," told me that people need to stop thinking about God. Solemnly, as we walked off the Ave and wandered between the trees on the University of Washington's campus to avoid being seen by the police, Rage told me that there are few things more hazardous than thinking about God. "God is the most dangerous question anyone could ask," he said. Rage told me that it has been scientifically proven that "pondering God" makes people clinically insane. "People commit suicide over God," he said. "Hundreds and hundreds of people every year." Shaman, who once happily shared intriguing thoughts about God as we walked the streets, told me one afternoon that he *had* to stop thinking about God. We were sitting on purple steps of an evangelical church. He looked distraught. "Thinking about God is making me crazy," he said. A few weeks later, Shaman went to a mental hospital. After three days in the hospital, Shaman came back to the streets thinking he might be the resurrected Christ and that I could be one of his 12 disciples.

Over a pot of coffee at Denny's, Plato told me that he would like to believe in a personal and loving God. "It just doesn't seem possible, though." For Plato, there is too little love and too much suffering for that to make sense. "Maybe it's like a creator," he said. "I mean," he corrects himself, "maybe the creator is like a painter who created a beautiful painting. It's like he makes it, sells it, and then moves on to the next one. Does he adore the painting? Sure. Maybe he even has pride in it. But love? Absolute love? I'm sure he doesn't want to see his painting absolutely go to shit or be destroyed," he says, "but honestly if it happened then could the artist move on to another painting? There may be some suffering there, but will it destroy God?" he asks rhetorically. "No."

"So," Plato says, "I don't know." He says he could come up with another analogy but that it won't get close to what he is trying to say. Like most street kids, Plato cloaks God language in hesitation and mystery.

Plato told me, as he finished his coffee and pancakes at Denny's, with his animal companion, Kali, at his feet, that he has one last thing to say. He said that his sense of God comes from a feeling, not a fact. He said he doesn't know what to call this feeling but that he feels it when he sees people smile, when he sees an elderly couple holding hands, when he hears a child

laugh, or when he is starving and someone gives him twenty dollars out of nowhere. “But there is another feeling, too,” Plato says. “What really scares me,” he says, “is that there might be no purpose. Like all this trying to be good and do the right thing is, in the end, for nothing. Like there is no deeper purpose to it. I hate to admit it,” Plato says, “but I am afraid to believe there isn’t *Something* out there.”

What God Means and How God Matters on the Streets

How young adults living on the streets of Seattle spoke about God demonstrates four empirical points. First, God matters. The question of God, that is, evokes pressing existential concerns that most street kids think through—and that matters in their experiences of homelessness. Second, there is no single formula to describe how people talk about God on the street. The God language people use is often hesitant and ambivalent—and spoken about like a meandering riddle without end. God concepts also change on the streets, sometimes quite radically. The most anti-Christian person in my research (who delighted in the thought of setting fire to Christian churches), for example, became the only unapologetically Christian one. For many, moreover, the word “God” is refused—and “*Something*,” “higher power” or “The Universe” is used instead. Third, the street kids that I spent time with, for the most part, did not believe in a personally loving God. If there is a person-like entity that exists outside a person, it was thought to be *Something* like a creator who abandoned creation, operates with a dismissive relationship to it, and only intervenes through acts of life-saving care. The Christian God, though culturally present and accessible to the imagination, did not survive the experiences of homelessness for the young adults that I spent time with. But even a distant and negligent conception of God, it must be emphasized—a *Something*, an alien-like God in the seventh grade—reminded street kids that their lives matter and might have ultimate purpose. Fourth, when discussed as a higher power or impersonal but benevolent force like The Universe, God was spoken of as an immanent power *in* the human person. This higher power could help make life livable by preventing danger and cultivating real joy.

One may wonder why the Christian conception of God fails to resonate on the streets. Five additional empirical points are important to consider. The first

point is that, for the young adults that I spent time with, and an increasing number of people in the United States, the Christian God has been constructed and experienced in relation to a wounding, exclusionary political force (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Conservative political figures, for example,— like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Pete Hegseth, who have labored to reconstruct the United States into their version of Christianity—have created a god that is anathema for street kids like Apocalypse’s wellbeing. Second, as a conscious and unconscious strategy to survive the streets, many street kids distance themselves from the political force(s) of Christianity, which they themselves often report being wounded by (Blankenship-Lai, 2025). Apocalypse turns from Jesus and leaves the church because, for him, based on what he has learned and experienced, Christianity has created too much suffering in the world. Third, due to the larger epistemological transformations that have placed us in an “immanent frame” (Taylor, 2007) and how enchanted our species has become by material objects (Cavanaugh, 2024), the possibility of experiencing a Christian God is less likely today than it was a few centuries ago. Apocalypse lives in a relatively new world, then—where his own existential survival does not depend on believing in God. Having faith in God is, therefore, as Tanya Marie Luhrmann puts it, very hard work in our time (Luhrmann, 2020). Fourth, the social conditions on the streets, which influence how Apocalypse makes sense of his life, do not suggest that a personally loving God is real. The unloving social conditions of street life make the hard work of faith in a personally loving God even harder—and, I have indicated, potentially damaging to one’s mental health. In her masterful book, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Ana-Maria Rizzuto demonstrated that only a deity meaningfully connected to the “warp and woof” of one’s everyday life is likely to resonate (Rizzuto, 1979).

Paul Farmer and Loic Wacquant have argued that the local, marginalized worlds that anthropologists study are inevitably shaped by geopolitical forces and structural violence—and that it is a mistake to neglect their presence in ethnographic analysis (Farmer, 2001; Wacquant, 2002). Apocalypse himself, though homeless, isn’t naïve to the geopolitical forces that wound his life and influence his spirituality. He reads the paper, listens to the news, and took classes in social science at school. Apocalypse knows that Seattle, and the United States more broadly, came into existence through the genocide of Indigenous people and the slave labor of

black and brown bodies (Asaka, 2023). He understands that people are on the streets because they do not have homes, that they do not have homes because they cannot afford them, and that they cannot afford them because they are quantifiably unaffordable (Colburn and Aldern, 2022). Though he doesn't know the numbers, exactly, he is mindful that homelessness and housing insecurity aren't peculiar to the United States. In point of fact, globally, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing, 883 million live in slums, and 22 million are displaced every year due to the climate crisis (Salcedo, 2018). Apocalypse is not surprised when he learns, on a public health poster plastered on a traffic sign by an anarchist, that suicide is a leading cause of death for people of all ages—his own suffering, after all, is itself an international story about how the world cares more for profit and power than human and nonhuman wellbeing (CDC 2024; Amrith 2024). Apocalypse sees the world on the streets of Seattle and the Christian God of love does not seem present there.

Figure 2
Dumpster Living



Conclusion: A Possible Future for Christian Anthropology

In this article, I queried what spirituality is like for young adults living on the streets of Seattle. I demonstrated that everyday life on the streets is constituted by a confluence of social wounds that violently penetrate the human person soul deep. I showed that, on the streets, spirituality is about cultivating a life worth living in an almost unlivable local world; tending one's social wounds by connecting

to *Something* that brings a purpose and power for living; and by *rejecting* what is experientially otherwise and antithetical to one's wellbeing. This article also showed that the Christian conception of God usually fails to resonate on the streets because of the unloving social conditions of everyday life—conditions all too prevalent around the globe—and that, when street kids ponder God, they are likely to imagine *Something* like (a) a negligent creator or (b) a higher power within.

What does it mean to be a Christian Anthropologist in the global catastrophe of homelessness? How shall we answer Apocalypse—and the other figures who, whether homeless or housed, call to us, and perhaps *A Great Something*, as they search for themselves? I will make three proposals in the pages that remain. At stake is a seed for reflection that might bloom into an institutionalized project on Christian love throughout time and place, be made accessible for the public good, and help people like Apocalypse find themselves. I want, in the conclusion of this article, to imagine a compassionate “classroom”, outline a workable research objective, and sketch a new ethnography that can be practiced in diverse local worlds where we can learn together how Christian love can become more loving. I also want to create hospitality for constructive critique and (re)formation, knowing the limits of my perspective and the preciousness of collaboration, Christian and otherwise.

First, may we be encouraged. May we begin with what is already good. The *raison d'être* of this journal is the cultivation of a distinctly Christian school of thought within anthropology. The founders of the On Knowing Humanity Research Project—which included five anthropologists, three theologians, and a historian—created an anthropological subfield informed by theology and analogous to Marxist, feminist, and Indigenous anthropologies. Our consistent argument has been that anthropology undermines itself when it excludes and denigrates religiously committed perspectives (Meneses and Bronkema, 2017). Moreover, the panoply of human experience is, we have claimed, impoverished without respect for the multifaceted Christian standpoint(s), which are not reducible to the follies and violences of human beings and the institutions they create. This work of creating a Christian school of anthropology has born considerable fruit, as we can see. We have developed a robust epistemological foundation for how theological insights can advance anthropology and demonstrated how ethnography can be practiced Christianly. As a result of our efforts, we have been

recognized by the most esteemed anthropologists of our time and published in leading anthropology journals.

My second proposal is that we remember that we still have important work to do. The world appears more divided than when *On Knowing Humanity* started, not less. We are facing apocalypse and cannot look unaware. Christians are accountable for much of the divisiveness that marks our world—as we are responsible for indispensable, exemplary peace-making. Christianity is also always changing—and implementing theologies and spiritual practices in local worlds with global impact that may have good intentions but inadequate evidence of efficacy. Christian anthropologists are in a unique position to enter different Christian field sites, explain what is happening from their unique standpoint, and communicate their findings truthfully for the benefit of a more peaceably pluralistic world.

My third proposal is about a new possibility for Christian anthropology. It is about how to “grow the good” that we have created, should the collective winds of discernment move us freely into this unknown. But maybe “new” isn’t the right word. What I am proposing is that we make more explicit what has always been at least implicit in our work, which is an attempt to serve God through new practices of love (Howell and Paris, 2010). Here, I put my hands into our epistemological dirt, gather some theological and anthropological material, and imagine a classroom. This “classroom” within our school would be a compassionate space that focuses on diverse practices of Christian love throughout time and place. It would query the histories, theologies, and observable efficacies of diverse Christian love practices. This classroom would chronicle Christian love practices with the resources of anthropology and theology, put the practices into an archive, and make the archive accessible for various publics. Through what I call *agapeic ethnographies*, this classroom would also train Christian anthropologists and theologians to conduct research in different local worlds for the purpose of learning how to love them. By love, I am referring to the divine, nonviolent force, which Jesus embodied in his life, that works for the real, observable good of others without expecting anything in return (Keller 2007; Oord 2022). This classroom would also grapple with why Christian love fails to resonate and be experienced as loving. The work of this proposed classroom—its historical and contemporary archive on Christian love—would produce ethnographic material

for use in university classrooms, faith-based organizations, popular media, and public policy. It would also help fill an identifiable research gap in theology and the social sciences. As Christian Smith has argued, our capacity to understand social life is currently derelict because social scientists have, by and large, failed to take Pitirim Sorokin’s recommendation, (Sorokin, 1950) and study love seriously (Smith, 2015).

It is important for both Christianity and anthropology that a respected school of *Christian anthropology* exists within anthropology. The world is a more tolerant, beautiful place with sophisticated anthropological research from diverse Christian standpoints. It is also important, however, for the Christian anthropologist to cultivate spiritual freedom from anthropology—and any academic discipline, including theology—that is created by human creatures and inevitably formed by social powers that may undermine Christian values. Our call is not, in the end, of course, to professional success, epistemological validation, and institutional survival. The slow, painful work of opening our souls, by grace, to the lives of different creatures in different local worlds for what might become transformative ethnographic insight that freely and without force loves lovingly, is, I propose, our call. And our joy.

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