

Our doing becomes us: performativity, spiritual practices and becoming Christian

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Our doing becomes us: performativity, spiritual practices and becoming Christian

Actor, Andrew Garfield “fell in love with Jesus” as he engaged in Ignatian spiritual practices in preparation for playing Father Rodrigues in the movie, *Silence*. While the importance of spiritual practices for faith formation is well recognised, spiritual practices are generally associated with developing spiritual maturity rather than with such pre-conversion engagement. This paper considers Garfield’s account of meeting Jesus alongside the lived experiences of other recent converts who similarly engaged in spiritual practices before their conversions to Christianity. It argues that understanding the Christian faith as performative helps explain how Christian faith is formed and made real through such embodied acts of ritualised practice.

Keywords: spiritual practices; faith formation; conversion; embodied spirituality; performativity

Introduction

Actor, Andrew Garfield prepared to play Jesuit priest, Father Rodrigues in the movie *Silence*, by engaging in a six-month period of Ignatian spiritual exercises. This professionally motivated exercise became life-changing, as Garfield fell “in love with Jesus” (Busse 2017). His *doing* Ignatian spiritual practices resulted in his *becoming* one who has a “relationship with Jesus” (Rafanelli 2016).

As Ignatius of Loyola notes, just as physical practices form us physically, spiritual practices can form us spiritually (1914, First annotation). Spiritual practices facilitate a growing awareness of the transcendent, and provide a means of coming to know God, the world, and oneself. However, spiritual practices are generally associated with developing spiritual maturity rather than with pre-conversion engagement.

This article considers Garfield's experience alongside the conversion accounts of nine previously unchurched Australians, exploring the spiritual practices that each engaged in before they embraced Christianity, and paying particular attention to embodied practices. Presuming the redemptive activity of God in the world, as the source of life and transformation, the article argues that understanding Christian spirituality as performative helps to explain why engaging in spiritual practices can lead to conversion to Christianity.

Garfield's story

Years before accepting the role of Rodrigues in *Silence*, Garfield had experienced an encounter with God, in which God provided inspiration and a new outlook. Debilitatingly nervous about an imminent stage performance, Garfield walked the city, feeling terrified and inadequate. In what he now recognises as a "moment of prayer," he named his inadequacy, seeking help from God. He then heard a street performer sing – rather imperfectly – Don McLean's, "Vincent" (1971). Garfield recognised that despite the singer's imperfection, he had transformed Garfield's outlook. The singer's vulnerability and willingness to offer his talent inspired Garfield to do the same. Garfield reported: "And literally the clouds parted, and the sun came out and shone on me and this guy and I was just weeping uncontrollably. And it was like God was grabbing my [sic] by the scruff of the neck and saying, 'You've been thinking that if you go on stage you're going to die. But actually, if you don't you're going to die'." However, while Garfield was changed and empowered by this spiritual and embodied encounter, this moment ("the deepest experience of God's presence in his life") did not then result in him pursuing a relationship with God (Busse 2017).

Fast forward over a decade and Garfield was cast as Jesuit priest, Father Rodrigues in *Silence*. A committed actor, he prepared for his role by immersing himself in the Ignatian spiritual life. Not a field trip, or site visit. Rather, six months of spiritual practices, including celibacy; a seven-day silent retreat; and ongoing spiritual direction (Busse 2017): an embodied experience of spiritual and physical retreat, incorporating intense spiritual

discipline. During that period, Garfield changed from having no relationship with Jesus, to “falling in love” with him (Busse 2017). What happened? How did Garfield’s transformation occur? I believe he was formed into a love for Christ through his engagement in Ignatian spiritual practices.

Christians are well aware of the transformative role of the divine in spiritual practices. We engage in such exercises hoping to meet with God and to be changed and to grow. However, spiritual practices are usually associated with faith development *after* conversion. They are not generally understood as potentially leading *to* religious conversion. In Garfield’s experience we see an example of embodied spiritual practices igniting and resourcing the earliest stages of faith development.

The stories of other recent converts

My research on recent converts to Christianity revealed similar findings. Pre-conversion engagement in spiritual practices was a crucial element of non-Christians’ journeys towards Christian faith. This section offers a brief overview of my research design before exploring the nature of pre-conversion engagement in spiritual practices, that was revealed by my research.

The research

The empirical research that informs this paper began with the lived experiences of previously unchurched Australians, who converted to Christianity less than two years before they were interviewed. It used critical realism as a research philosophy and grounded theory as a methodology to answer research questions about the conversion process, the roles in conversion of other Christians and God, and the deep processes occurring within the converts. (For a thorough description of the research design, see Taylor 2017, 25-83.)

A new model of conversion

The research revealed a new, multidimensional model of religious conversion. Figure 1

shows two dimensions of that model: the conversion process itself and the affects the converts experienced (Taylor 2017, 248).¹

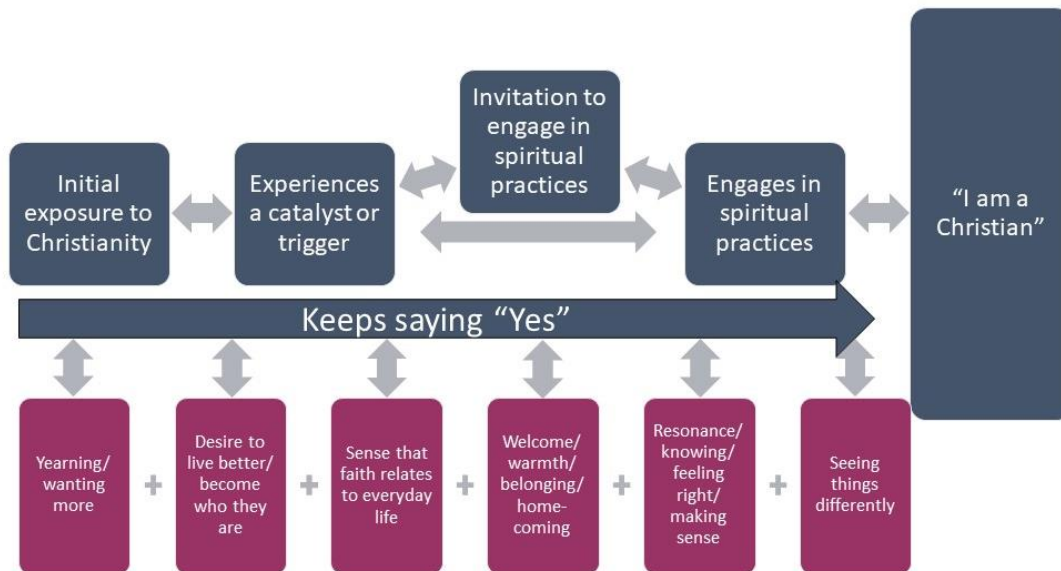


Figure 1: Conversion process and affects

The conversion process began with some exposure to Christianity, generally through interactions with a friend, work colleague or family member, and/or links with a church school. This initial exposure may have occurred several years before something acted as a trigger or catalyst, encouraging them to explore Christianity further. They engaged in spiritual practices, generally following an invitation to do so. Having said “yes” several times to continuing in the conversion process, they reached a point where they called themselves a Christian.

Except for the final stage of calling himself a Christian, Garfield’s journey followed this same pattern. His lead role in Mel Gibson’s movie *Hacksaw Ridge* had provided him with an exposure to Christianity. The catalyst for his faith exploration was his involvement in

¹ I am using the term *affect* in its broader psychological or philosophical sense, to contrast *affective* processes with *cognitive* processes (Zajonc 1980; Forgas 2000).

Silence. With the role came an invitation to engage in spiritual practices, which lead to a thorough engagement in those practices. However, Garfield did not describe himself as a “Christian,” rather as “pantheist, agnostic, occasionally atheist and a little bit Jewish, but mostly confused” (Galloway 2016). Despite this, Garfield clearly named his love for Jesus, alongside the anger he felt “on [Jesus’] behalf when [Garfield] did meet him, because everyone has given him such a bad name” (Busse 2017). This suggests that Garfield’s reluctance to call himself a “Christian” might be due to a negative perception of other Christians, rather than a lack of personal faithfulness to Christ.

Returning to the model, six deeply-felt affects both resulted from, and contributed to the conversion process. A yearning or desire for more; and a desire to live better, or become a better person, often motivated the convert’s spiritual search. A sense that faith relates to everyday life; and experiencing a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming, contributed to their ongoing exploration. A deep sense of resonance, knowing, rightness or making sense; and an ability to see things in new ways, acted as both cause and consequence of the conversion process. Engaging in spiritual practices contributed to the participants experiencing these affects.

Like those I interviewed, Garfield reported experiencing five of these affects. In relation to yearning or wanting more, Garfield “knows well the longing for love.” In terms of a desire to be a better person or become who he really is, he noted: “There were so many things in the Exercises that changed me and transformed me, that showed me who I was ... and where ... God wants me to be.” He described himself feeling “at home” when he meditated on the Nativity. A sense of feeling right, or making sense, permeated the interview, and his outlook was certainly changed (Busse 2017).

This paper focuses on one element of the conversion process: engagement in spiritual practices, specifically, those spiritual practices that participants performed before embracing

Christianity for themselves. It pays particular attention to the embodied nature of many of those practices. First, however, I explore two embodied practices that occurred during participants' initial exposure to Christianity. These are important here because they helped those impacted to become open to Christianity. Clearly embodied, they could readily have been described as spiritual practices if the person experiencing them had been a person of faith. Let me demonstrate this, first by returning to Garfield.

Embodied experiences in initial exposure to Christianity

As part of Garfield's desperate pre-performance London walk, he expressed to God his sense of inadequacy. While he later recognised that this call for help was a prayer, a Christian may well have seen this entire walk as an embodied act of praying.

One of the participants in my research, Olivia, reported that her childhood involvement in a secular choir provided her earliest encounter with Christianity. Singing religious songs in choir made her "wonder" about Christianity. She sensed that those who wrote and sang the songs had "something special" and she attributed this to God. Having been permitted absolutely no contact with Christianity, her embodied act of singing religious songs was Olivia's only pre-adult exposure to Christianity. It opened her to the possibility of God.

Another participant, Mary, began (aged five years) to regularly dream about Jesus. The dreams involved her and Jesus playing together in a forest and they provided her with a life-long sense that Jesus loved her. Later, her dreams became even more embodied, as she felt God physically present with her, holding her as she slept. Upon awakening, she was "devastated" as her sense of God's presence left her. Mary's yearning to experience more of God's presence fuelled her journey towards Christianity.

While dreams are not generally included in lists of spiritual practices, they have been described as such (Nelson 2016). Singing (as a form of worship) is a common spiritual

practice. In the examples recounted above, the embodied acts of singing and dreaming opened Olivia and Mary to spiritual experiences and to God. At the same time, none of these three (including Garfield), deliberately set out to engage in spiritual practices. We turn next to consider times when engagement in spiritual practices was deliberate.

Intentionally engaging in spiritual practices

Spiritual practices are defined in various ways (Dykstra and Bass 2002, 20). I am using the term to mean those activities that helped to form participants spiritually. Such spiritual practices include both “ascetical and spiritual disciplines and exercises by which people deliberately seek to become more attuned to the sacred,” as well as informal practices such as fellowship (Dykstra and Bass 2002, 20). Communal spiritual practices include “attending religious services, engaging in intimate dialogues as well as formal discussions with fellow believers, undergoing religious education, and seeking out spiritual guidance when distressed” (Mahoney and Pargament 2004, 490). Personal spiritual practices include prayer, bible reading and study, and worship (Calhoun 2015). All are ways by which we may encounter God.

Table 1 shows the spiritual practices each participant engaged in. When participants clearly reported engaging in these practices before becoming Christians, their data point is shown as a check mark (✓); otherwise the engagement is represented by a dot (•).

Table 1: Engagement in spiritual practices²

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Meg	Mary	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Attending church	✓	•	✓	✓	✓	•	✓	✓	✓
Praying	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

² All names are pseudonyms.

Reading the bible	✓	✓	•	✓	•	✓	✓	•	•
Fellowship	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Worship (singing)	•	•	•	•		•	(✓)	•	•
Baptism			•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Small group	✓		✓	✓		•	✓		
Using gifts		•		•		•		•	•
Sharing faith	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Overall, participants described nine types of spiritual practices. Five of these practices – attending church, praying, reading the bible, fellowshiping, and participating in a small group – were engaged in by at least four participants before their conversions. Each of these was a discipline of engagement rather than of abstinence.³

Next, I report on these five practices, paying particular attention to the theme of embodiment. In relation to church going, I share brief details from each participant. For the sake of brevity, in the subsequent sections, I introduce one participant’s story in some detail, noting some salient points from others.

Attending church: For most participants, attending church services (before becoming a Christian) was an important part of their journey towards Christian faith. Note the words relating to embodiment, touch and physicality in the following accounts.

When Grace attended church, it “felt right [so she] went back the next week and the next week.” Jean, after attending an Alpha Course, had a deep-felt desire to attend church. While she found church “quite overwhelming” because “there was a lot to take on board,” she also experienced a “feeling of being in the right place.” For her, church helps “bring [God] closer.” Luke found his new church welcoming and engaging, as well as full of “energy”. Meg was seeking deliverance from demonic possession when she first attended church. Olivia decided to explore Christianity by attending church. She was clear about her

³ This contrasts with Garfield’s experience, which included a silent retreat and a period of celibacy.

desire for formation: seeking a church with a “structure in place to help people grow and develop.” When Sarah attended church: “the Lord [was] there ... smack in [her] face”. She also felt connected to the minister, who had preached a “moving” sermon that “touched [her] heart.” Tallulah attended church in order to develop a relationship with God and to listen to the sermons. She particularly liked personal testimonies which described the “story behind [people’s] faith” and the way that those experiences had grown their faith. She also reported feeling “close to God” at church.

When Mary finally attended a worship service (after becoming a Christian), she had a deep sense of homecoming. She was “so overwhelmed with how beautiful [the church] was ... [that she] could have [stayed and] slept there in [her] pew.” Like Mary, Hamish did not attend church until after he had become a Christian. He found a church where he “felt at home. Felt [it was] the right place to be.”

These church-going experiences provided an environment where those I interviewed could discover more about the Christian faith, engage in healthy relationships with Christians and enjoy a positive sense of welcome, home and ‘rightness’. Attending church required embodied action, both in terms of them physically going to church, and during the services as they participated in worship and liturgy. The participants described their experiences in embodied terms: feeling warmth, closeness to God and a homecoming. The desires for healing, wholeness and growth that had helped draw them to church were desires for holistic wellbeing.

Attending church was by no means the only practice that formed the faith of those I interviewed. Next, we explore prayer.

Praying: About five years before she became a Christian, Jean was invited to pray with her Christian friend, Liz, whose father was unwell. Jean described it as follows:

One of my really, really good friends ... her father was going through chemotherapy and cancer and she would often say, “Please just ... come and pray with me.” And I would ... think, “How is that going to make a difference because I am not religious” and I didn’t understand it. But she just felt so comforted by it that I would just sit there and pray with her. And you know, he’s not in perfect health, but ... it was the first time I really thought, “Wow this can make a difference as well.” ... That just kind of got me thinking [that] maybe this prayer stuff is real.

Jean’s experience of praying with her friend, and having those prayers answered, made her see value in the Christian faith. However, she did not embrace Christianity at that time.

Like Jean, other participants began praying before they became Christians. Hamish prayed despite not believing God existed: in fact, he prayed specifically that God would not be true. Luke, Meg and Sarah all cried out to God for help in times of desperate need. Mary was in constant communion with God. Olivia prayed for guidance as she decided about committing to the Christian faith. Tallulah prayed her way through her journey to faith.

Many of these prayers were embodied: such as Jean’s and Meg’s prayers for healing and Luke’s and Sarah’s desperate crying out to God for help. Mary, as she had in her dreams of Jesus, embodied a prayerful desire for deep spiritual and physical connection with God.

Often, the prayers represented distinct moments of engagement, like Garfield’s early prayer for help. Others were a more sustained participation in spiritual practices, like Garfield’s participation in Ignatian spirituality.

Reading the bible: Hamish’s experience of reading the bible, like Garfield’s engagement with the Jesuits, occurred over a longer period of time. Before he became a Christian, Hamish was a “militant, evangelical atheist.” He loved to “cherry-pick” verses from the bible to use to argue with Christians. But one day, he began to explore the bible further. He says, “Walking

past my bookcase, ... out of the corner of my eye flashed a bit of gold leaf, and I went, ‘What was that?’” Realising it was a bible, he decided to “pay attention” to it: not just once, but many times as the bible “just kept being in [his] field of view.” Reading John’s gospel, he realised, “This is really powerful stuff,” as God spoke to him through what he was reading. Hamish’s ongoing bible reading, combined with fellowship and discussion, culminated in him one day naming a faith in God. He described that moment as follows:

And then one day [six months after he had noticed and started reading his bible] I had to let my little dog out to go to the toilet, [at] 3 o’clock in the morning. [I] looked up at the stars. And in my head, I heard, it sounds strange, but I will say it, I heard “the heavens will declare his majesty” when I was looking up at the stars. And I sort of just went... I didn’t fall to my knees, I didn’t burst out crying, I just went, “Uh. I’m a Christian now” and walked back inside.

As for Garfield, Hamish’s *doing* Christian spiritual practices had helped him to *become* a Christian.

Others also reported reading the bible before becoming Christians. While their reading of the bible would not (beyond the simple physicality of reading) be described as embodied, they reported key learnings and impressions from the bible that often directly related to their lived experience.

Fellowship and small groups: Luke’s story most clearly demonstrated the way that fellowship with Christians can lead to faith formation. Suffering the aftereffects of a debilitating accident, Luke was loved deeply by a group of Christian friends who invited him into their lives. They ate together, spent time together and shared about life and faith. For Luke, this care and friendship was essential, both for his wellbeing and for his faith

formation. For others as well, fellowship often occurred within the context of church-linked small groups: places of support, learning and growth. In these fellowship and small groups, embodiment was evident in food shared and lives deeply entwined.

Christianity as performative and embodied

How can we understand these experiences? Of Garfield? Of those whom I interviewed? In these accounts, God was clearly at work: drawing people to God, inviting and making possible the way for relationship between God and human beings, and acting in the lives of those interviewed (Taylor 2017, 192-226; 302-326). While aware that the activity of God lies behind human response, this article particularly illuminates the human dimension.

The significance of engaging in spiritual practices as a means of developing spiritual maturity is well recognised (Calhoun 2015; Foster 2012; Willard 2002; Oman et al. 2012, 278-280; Roberto 2010; Tippens 2015; Volf and Bass 2002; Zanzig 2012). However, spiritual practices (with the possible exception of attending church) are not generally associated with the earliest stages of Christian faith development.

Social scientists are more likely than theologians to note the impact of pre-conversion engagement in spiritual practices. Psychologist, Lewis Rambo suggests that non-Christians who “want to change and grow religiously,” employ spiritual practices as a means of growth (1993, 84). However, neither Jean, nor Hamish, nor Garfield was specifically motivated by a desire for growth at the earliest stages of their spiritual journeys. Jean was responding in a caring way to a friend’s request to pray for her father. Hamish’s intent was to discredit the bible.⁴ Garfield’s desire to find “his own place in the world” as well as his “feeling of not-

⁴ Hamish began reading the bible, thinking: “I’m just going to have a flick through and have a good chuckle... about what these silly Christians believe.”

enough-ness” could possibly be understood as a desire for growth, but mostly he was exploring Ignatian spirituality for professional reasons (Busse 2017).

Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow notes how spiritual practices both set aside a sacred space, and facilitate a growing awareness of the transcendent (1998, 16-17). Seen thus, spiritual practices could be expected to be formative for spiritual seekers as well as for those who have already embraced faith (1998, 3-4; 168-198). However, while some I interviewed were spiritual seekers, others – Hamish, for example; and this is true of Garfield as well – began to engage in spiritual practices before they had a conscious interest in spiritual matters. At the same time, all of those I interviewed, and Garfield, enjoyed what Wuthnow described as a deepening awareness of the supernatural because of their engagement in spiritual practices.

Anthropologist, Paul Hiebert highlights the need to re-create vibrant, transformative, rituals as a means of facilitating personal change (2008, 322-324). Sociologist of religion and ethicist, Erin Dufault-Hunter notes that “personal transformation comes through practices informed and influenced by the central stories of the religious tradition: [including] rituals like prayer, worship, song; [and] skills like meditation or peacemaking” (2012, x).

Thus, all these scholars allow for the transformative potential of spiritual practices on the earliest stages of faith development. Theologians, by contrast, are generally more attentive to the faith formation of those who are already Christians. Of course, they do not necessarily preclude the potential of spiritual practices to form faith where there is none, but neither do they highlight it. Practical theologians, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, argue that “it is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves” (2002, 24). However, their work implies such practices build on an existing faith, or at the least on one’s baptismal vows. For example, they see engagement in spiritual practices as an opportunity to “live into the promises made at [one’s] baptism”

(2002, 28). Similarly, theologian, Sarah Coakley, “presuppose[s] ... the fundamental infusion of grace in the act of baptism” (2002, 84). Dallas Willard notes that Jesus’ disciples were formed through “being with Jesus learning to be like him.” However, even he presumes that contemporary discipleship begins with what “happens at conversion” (Willard 2011, 245). (Also, see Willard 1991, 114-118.) It is unlikely that these theologians are deliberately negating the potential of spiritual practices to help form faith among unbaptised non-Christians. Rather, their focus is simply on those who are already part of the church. My research, however, demonstrated that spiritual practices can also lead to faith where there was previously none, including among those who had not been baptised. This discovery is in keeping with understandings of God as missionary in nature: as one who draws people into relationship with God. While a Christendom context may have legitimated limiting the potential impact of engaging in spiritual practices to the faith development of believers, today’s secularised and secularising context requires consideration of how God is at work beyond the Church: in the world that God loves (Dunn 1998, 72; Kim 2010, 34-36).

Philosopher, Jamie Smith sheds light here: “recognizing the ... formative power of *practices* – communal, embodied rhythms, rituals, and routines that over time quietly and unconsciously prime and shape our desires and most fundamental longings” (2013, 4). This formation sounds like Garfield’s experience: a reshaping of his desires towards Jesus. Similarly, for those I interviewed, their engagement in spiritual practices shaped them into followers of Christ.⁵

One reason why Christians fail to notice the potential of spiritual practices to form faith in non-Christians is the Western, post-reformation emphasis on propositional belief systems (Bielo 2012, 260). It is generally presumed that one first embraces Christianity

⁵ This is not to suggest that they were transformed by their own effort: God’s grace and activity was clearly evident in all their conversion stories. However, their performative engagement in spiritual practices provided an environment in which that transformation occurred.

cognitively: essentially *deciding* to become a Christian. However, those I interviewed *realised*, more than *decided*, that they had become Christians. Similarly, Garfield's description of falling in love with Jesus does not seem primarily cognitive.

Understanding the Christian faith as 'performative' helps provide an explanation for these accounts. The Christian faith is formed and made real through performed or embodied acts of ritualised practice. Social scientists, Vincett, Olson, Hopkins and Pain argue that our secularised, pluralised, consumerised context "de-emphasizes propositional belief systems in favour of what [they] call performance Christianity" (2012, 275). They note three key characteristics of religiosity in the young people in Glasgow they researched: "mobility, authenticity, and practical expression" (2012, 275). The practical expression of those young people was performative, representing an "embodiment of ritualised practice" (2012, 277). These practices were transformative, moving the young people towards what the writers call a 'moral' authenticity. Rather than cognitive *belief*, the emphasis is on the activity of *believing*, which is "a process, a working out, a performance" (2012, 278).⁶ Belief is made real, or authentic, through the actions of the believers (see McFadyen 2012, 931-932). Again, while not specifically about the early stages of faith formation, this research points to the importance of *embodied practice* in contemporary Christianity, as a means of developing and expressing authentic faith.

Linguist, Cecilia Ayometzi researching undocumented immigrants (in the USA) who converted to Christianity, makes overt the link between *doing* and *becoming*. She observed that members of the Spanish Mission "are constantly told that they actually become who they perceive themselves to be only when in fact they engage in doing what they believe themselves to be" (2007, 53). (Also, see Yang and Abel 2014, 144-145.) Anthropologist,

⁶ Note the word "performance" speaks here of action rather than inauthenticity (Ruel 2005, 255).

Tanya Luhrmann observed the way engaging in the spiritual practice of prayer helped people to hear from God (2012, 133). Some prisoners who convert to Christianity attribute “their conversion to deep, private reading of the Bible in their cells” (Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006, 167). In all these accounts, the embodied actions of ongoing engagement in spiritual practices helped form people as Christians.

Many theologians and practitioners today recognise the need to prioritise “cultivating spiritual experiences and developing religious practices” over articulating, teaching and learning a so-called “Christian worldview” (Horell 2004, 9). They see that such “tangible, embodied practices ... are conduits of the Spirit’s transformative power” (Smith 2013, 15). (Also, see Tippens 2015, 23; Markham 2006, 5.) Yet despite this, little emphasis is placed on encouraging engagement in spiritual practices as a formative means of Christian witness. Discipleship is generally understood as beginning after conversion: after the convert has given cognitive assent to Christian truths. However, for all of those I interviewed – as for Garfield – engaging in spiritual practices, including attending church; reading the bible; praying; fellowshiping; and participating in small groups before they were Christians, contributed to their earliest faith formation and transformation.

In Hamish’s story, we can clearly see how engaging in spiritual practices – *doing* – may occur very early in the spiritual journey, and lead towards religious conversion – *becoming* Christian. Hamish began reading the bible while still an atheist and found himself drawn into what he was reading. Wanting to know more, he kept reading, and through this and other spiritual practices, Hamish was changed and transformed. He was not seeking to become a Christian. Rather, he was actively resisting such change: he spoke of “a real fight with God” as, for six months, he tried to maintain his unbelief in the face of his growing awareness of God. But Hamish’s engagement in spiritual practices (and God’s grace) transformed him into a Christian disciple.

This has implications for the church. Rather than emphasising *belief* as giving cognitive assent to specific truths, prioritising and resourcing engagement in spiritual practices, including among non-Christians, can be a fruitful model for Christian witness. Similarly, rather than seeing church attendance or bible reading as a means of convincing non-Christians of the truth of the Christian faith, inviting engagement in spiritual practice can be a means of seeing desires and longings become oriented towards God.

Recognising this potential of spiritual practices to form people towards Christian faith also rightly acknowledges that God is already at work in the lives of all people, including non-Christians. The missionary endeavour is never first the initiative of humans. God acted throughout Scripture, throughout history, and continues to act today, to bring reconciliation and to return humanity to its created purpose of imaging the triune God. Seeing engagement in spiritual practices as a way of reforming humanity towards that purpose rightly places God as the primary agent in conversion.

To reiterate, recognising the formative nature of engagement in spiritual practices, and the performative nature of Christian spirituality, requires us to extend our understanding of the significance of spiritual practices beyond maturing the faith of those who are already Christians. Spiritual practices can also work to form faith. These insights demonstrate that it is worth inviting participation in the spiritual practices of the Christian faith, not only as a means towards Christian maturity, but also as a potentially fruitful means of Christian witness.

Back to the movie

Finally, to return to *Silence*. *Silence* (the movie and the book) begins after the conversions have occurred. There are no stories of faith-finding. Only faithfulness, desperation, death and apostasy. I cannot explore from book or movie whether engagement in spiritual practices preceded faith formation in 17th century Japan. However, we clearly see the importance of spiritual practices for ongoing faith sustenance. We see the desperation of

the villagers and their relief in being offered the sacraments of bread and wine; baptism; and confession. We see the comfort of the rosary beads, given sacrificially; then crafted anew from paper and string. We hear Rodrigues' dogged calling to mind of the gospels, the "stations of the cross", the prayers of his faith. We see him in the final scene of the movie (spoiler alert) cradling a cross in his lifeless hand. Such embodied spiritual practices sustained Rodrigues' faith, and the faith of many early Japanese Christians, through desperately challenging times.

Further, while desperately bleak and often unfruitful, the experiences of Christian missionaries in 17th century Japan eventually led to Andrew Garfield falling in love with Jesus Christ. Our doing becomes us.

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