

Luther Phd Application Short Essay

1497 Words + Footnotes and Bibliography

By David Swenson

My area of intended research is an interdisciplinary project exploring the concept of fear. The idea for this project arises from both personal experience and prior academic study. In the form of a dialectical question, I want to ask: *What does the ancient Hebrew concept of “The Fear of the Lord” offer a secular generation living in an epidemic of cultural anxiety?* My initial thesis is that secular disenchantment has thoroughly disassociated psychology and human emotions from spirituality, or “spiritual realities.” In philosophical language, there has been an inherited loss of metaphysics leaving instead a faith composed of “language games.”¹ Through an effort in normative theology I intend to clarify the misunderstood Biblical concept of the Fear of the Lord.² The project will aim to “re-enchant” our understanding of psychology and human emotions, beginning with one of the root emotions—fear. Our modern experience of fear—however different or similar from ancient peoples—is primed as a path to spiritual renewal because what humans fear we worship. This is evident in the imagination of the Biblical authors and the Fear of the Lord is assumed as both a pre-condition and sustaining attribute of both Jews and later Christians.

This topic is relevant to practical theology and the practice of ministry because it seeks to examine the foundational cultural assumptions that faith leaders and congregants have unconsciously inherited. It investigates the core frameworks and modalities through which people relate to God—for example, the loss of metaphysical thinking in contemporary religion and its frequent replacement with strictly psychological-therapeutic frameworks. This research is both timely and likely to resonate within and beyond the academic sphere. While much scholarship has focused on mapping the contours of our secular age, recent trends indicate the emergence of post-secular inclinations. In cultural contexts where existing frameworks or “mental maps” fail to address fundamental human concerns, people are seeking, and will increasingly seek, more adequate ways to make sense of reality. These post-secular inclinations themselves testify to the enduring operation of spiritual realities underneath the cultural surface. The spiritual dimension of human personhood and reality remain active even when dismissed, overlooked, or marginalized by other dominant narratives.

I anticipate the scope and goals of the project will involve three primary domains of research. First, a thorough theological study of the concept of the Fear of the Lord across both the Old and New Testaments. Second, a study of current psychological research to map the

¹ I am alluding here to the loss of metaphysical confidence that can be implied as we follow first (and especially the late) Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn and later Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model. I find their observations helpful and insightful, while fundamentally disagreeing with the claim that all communities have lost correlation to an objective metaphysical reality. While descriptively helpful I find that the experiential-expressive, the cognitive-propositional, and Lindbeck’s own cultural-linguistic approach all fall short of a critical realist confidence in the ontological foundation of a Judeo-Christian framework.

² This is a critique that I find evidence for in both popularized church teaching and at an academic level in the field of Biblical studies.

scientific narrative explaining our epidemic of anxiety (fear displaced into a potential future), and more generally, the cultural narratives around fear. Third, a theological and philosophical exploration with relevant voices to bridge the cultural gap between ancient and modern. It is in this third domain that I intend to constructively extend these insights into a specific study of fear and its practical implications for ministry in the modern age.

For the Biblical-theological domain, I have already begun surveying relevant works by Tremper Longman III, Ted Hildebrandt, Robert H. Pfeiffer, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Of notable mention is the edited volume *Preaching the Fear of God in a Fear-Filled World*, produced from the Societas Homiletica Conference in 2018. Of particular relevance is an essay by Duke Old Testament scholar Anthea Portier-Young, titled “Linking Emotion, Cognition, and Action within a Social Frame: Old Testament Perspectives on Preaching the Fear of the Lord.” Her work highlights the power of the dialectical study I envision for this project. Her basic thesis is that modern biblical scholarship has sought to distance the Fear of the Lord from the emotional experience and threat of harm, instead claiming it is idiomatic and denotes reverence, piety, and worship.³

It is my aim to extend her thesis and analysis to demonstrate that this causality chain is not a uniquely Judeo-Christian perspective. Rather, it is a metaphysical reality that undergirds human creaturehood and our fundamental relation to being-in-the-world. This claim is more explicitly verifiable when analyzing the ancient Near East, with its rampant henotheism and embodied practices of idolatry. I intend to demonstrate that the most compelling aspect of the project is in extending the claim to the logical implication that emotion more generally is a fundamental way humans practice idolatry and participate in spiritual-realities, even when masked in secular-psychological language. Summarizing this succinctly, what humans fear we worship, obey, and become like. This mirrors the fundamental causality linking that Anthea Portier-Young is highlighting in her Old Testament analysis.

In light of this claim, for the second domain of research, I anticipate drawing from a mix of academic and popular voices. Here the goal is primarily descriptive and phenomenological: to map the cultural narrative around anxiety and fear. Relevant scholarly voices in this field might include Joseph E. LeDoux, David H. Barlow, and C. Donald Spielberger. On a more popular level, thinkers such as Jonathan Haidt, Abigail Marsh, and Rush Dozier. I also anticipate surveying cultural artifacts such as news, movies, music, and art to capture broader societal expressions. All of this with the aim of mapping a synthesized summary of the origins and dominant narratives around how modern western culture thinks about, experiences, and copes with fear.

Finally, I will pull upon key philosophical and theological voices to build a constructive argument demonstrating the relevance and need for the (re)discovery of the Fear of the Lord for the practice of ministry. Charles Taylor, although not definitive on every point, offers an

³ She writes, “the relationships between fear, worship, and wisdom in the Hebrew Bible are not due to synonymy, but a fundamental linking of emotion, cognition, and action.”

exemplary framework for mapping relevant cultural evolutions for this project.⁴ In unpacking the philosophical implications of this project I believe the epistemological frameworks of Michael Polanyi and Jean-Luc Marion are particularly relevant. Their work would help clarify how the biblical concept of the Fear of the Lord carries metaphysical and epistemological significance.⁵ Both of these thinkers articulate a more relational epistemology and an understanding of knowledge as a gift that is revealed through presence. This epistemological approach aligns with my theological understanding of what is transpiring specifically in the Biblical theophanies and experiences of the Fear of the Lord. I anticipate voices such as T.F. Torrance, Søren Kierkegaard,⁶ Jacques Ellul and perhaps even Luther himself would aid me in articulating the significance of this (re)discovery of the Fear of the Lord. They all in unique ways have laid bare the importance of our fundamental relationship with God and the implications for navigating faith in the modern world.

Additionally, after some initial exploratory discussions with Dr. Root, I would propose the possibility of placing my own biographical narrative of a strange embodied mystical experience (theophany?). This occurred in the midst of an existential crisis while working as a missionary in 2011. In this experience, I encountered an Angel in a parking lot in the middle of the night. For me, this was a visceral, emotive, philosophically “absurd,” and embodied experience with the Fear of the Lord—and it was genuine fear if ever I have felt it. This encounter was followed by the most powerful experiences I have ever had with the Love of God. Andrew thinks there could be a way of holding the project together around this biographical story, perhaps akin to Luther’s encounter with God in a violent thunderstorm in 1505.⁷

My undergraduate studies in Physics and Mathematics, laid a philosophical foundation in logic and deductive skills for understanding the complexities of reality. I also gained a foundational understanding of Western history, biblical studies, and theology through my Christian liberal arts studies at Bethel University. My graduate work in Theology provided focused training in systematic theology and a broad biblical overview. My elective courses and thesis research really immersed me in the field of theological method, practical theology, and engaging in integrative thinking. Those final years of graduate school were completed in early stage church-planting. This verified my aptitude and passion for inter-disciplinary research and writing unto their usefulness for the practice of ministry.

In my career I have approached ministry from an integrative posture. From work in an interdenominational missions agency, to church-planting, and also building a redemptive business. These experiences have given me firsthand insight into the practical working out of

⁴ Dr. Andrew Root would be extremely insightful for this given his work on Taylor and his general approach to integrating cultural analysis with normative theology. Other cultural commentators may prove helpful here, examples like Alasdair MacIntyre and Philip Reiff.

⁵ Contrasting them starkly with figures like Wittgenstein and Lindbeck reference in previous footnote.

⁶ Kierkegaard was extremely prescient on his analysis of Anxiety. For example, he names how what makes anxiety anxiety is that it is worry or fear with “no object.” This is the type of analysis that will be very helpful for bridging the gap between the ancient-Biblical imagination and experience to the evolution of fear into the modern age.

⁷ This could provide a concrete counter example that challenges the experiential-expressive, cognitive-propositional, and cultural-linguistic models of faith communities.

theology, highlighting the gaps between functional and confessional belief. This has inspired my desire to undertake a project that addresses core human emotions through a theological lens. It has also instilled in me a deep conviction of how much theology matters.

My vocational goals are to write and teach, serving the church at the intersection of academic research and practical ministry. I believe both the content of this project and the integrative research skills I develop will help me continue in this work. Currently, I serve in leadership roles in a local church in Denver, Colorado, and as a support coach for leaders within the 24-7 Prayer Communities Network. I also maintain relational connections to the Vineyard Church USA and other pioneering parachurch ministries, such as Practicing the Way and The Order of the Common Life. These communities remind me of the real people I hope to serve long-term through writing, teaching, and leadership support.

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