Sacred Circles and the Making of Place: An Interfaith Theological Reflection

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Abstract

This interfaith theological reflection examines sacred circles as adaptive practices of place-making amid a declining trust in inherited religious traditions. Drawing on participant-observer experience, pagan orthopraxy, and Christian theological resources, it argues that sacred circles function as pedagogical technologies that train attention, redistribute authority, and form moral imagination. When read through a Christian interpretive perspective offered by C. S. Lewis, these practices may offer concrete resources for reflective practice and leadership formation in plural and disrupted contexts.

Keywords

sacred circles; place-making; formation; orthopraxy; imagination

MY FIRST CIRCLE

I wasn't planning to stay long, but I wanted to honor the invitation. My friend's text message had said, "Summer Solstice Gathering: bonfire, song, ancestral honor." Planning on being a mere observer, I nervously gripped my notebook and pen and stepped off the gravel lane. Dusk draped the grove of trees in violet shadows. Before me a low circle of stones marked the gathering place, with logs and blankets arranged around the center. Someone had already lit the central fire. It crackled and flashed like it knew it had a part to play. People arrived quietly, barefoot, braided, bearing jars of herbs or lanterns. They greeted each other with soft embraces and left space for me along the edge of a gathering circle. I nodded and smiled, trying not to look too anthropological.

A woman with silver hair outstretched her arms, welcoming us with a voice that didn't reach for power. She spoke of the turning of the sun, of endings and beginnings, of ancestors who had also once watched the fire from just beyond the dark. She then receded back into the circle as, one by one, others stood and offered thanks—for growth, for grief, for things newly gained, for things let go. I was arrested by the moment. Something in the air echoed clear. The crackle of the fire. The open silence. The way people looked at one another—not to analyze or instruct but to behold.

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Suddenly, I realized those eyes were on me. It seemed now that the group saw me as a participant and not an onlooker. I timidly stood and offered thanks for the generosity of the space. Later, as the fire fell into embers, I stepped back to the edge of the field. The stars had emerged without fanfare. The circle behind me gently glowed, and I found myself thinking not of doctrine but of Moses, barefoot before the bush on fire.[1] Indeed, this place too was special. It was made sacred by a people who had chosen to make something sacred not by seizing it but by cultivating meaningful presence. What I felt that evening was not merely reverence but a practice of attending together that shaped how we listened, remembered, and imagined.

This theological reflection explores ritual aspects of sacred circles, not as relics of premodern religion but as contemporary practices of place-making that respond to institutional fragility. When received through disciplined Christian reflection, sacred circles offer practical resources for reflective practice and leadership formation in plural and disrupted contexts. This essay is written from the stance of a participant-observer and pastoral practitioner. I have taken part in and convened a variety of sacred circles, kept a reflective field journal of those experiences, and conducted follow-up conversations with several participants about their own experiences. My interpretive lens is deliberately interfaith and pastoral. I read vernacular rites with theological curiosity and with the evangelical commitments of my Christian formation. I approach pagan and Celtic materials as an attentive guest rather than an apologist. Ethically, I have sought permission before describing contemporary communal practices; I have also anonymized personal reflections and attributed quoted material to its source. Readers should note the limits of this method: the vignettes and practica reported here are illustrative rather than representative, and my theological readings are provisional, offered as a model for disciplined reception rather than definitive judgments upon other communities or worldviews.

A SACRED DISRUPTION

In my role supervising seminary students in their field education, I regularly bear witness to how emerging Christian ministry leaders struggle to inhabit inherited forms of practice amid changing institutional and cultural conditions. I often hear how the places that once shaped Christian formation—the parish hall, the midweek Bible study room, the sanctuary—are undergoing a visible disruption. Church membership, once a cultural default, has dropped below the majority position for the first time in modern history.[2] Present disruptions are often described as a decline: declining church attendance, declining membership, declining institutional influence. While these trends are real, they can obscure a more meaningful shift. The disruption facing Christian formation today is less a collapse of belief than it is a crisis of trust, engagement, and form. Recent sociological research consistently indicates that religious belief has proven more resilient than institutional participation.[3] What has eroded more dramatically is confidence in

religious institutions, along with the expectation that congregational life will reliably support moral formation, communal discernment, and meaningful belonging. Participation has become increasingly episodic and situational rather than denominational. In this sense, the disruption is not primarily theological but spatial and practical. Inherited forms of gathering no longer function as they once did.

Shifts like these remain inseparable from material constraints that impact change. Economic precarity, geographic mobility, fragmented schedules, digital mediation, and the decline in "voluntary association" as a dominant cultural pattern have all altered how people relate to institutions.[4] Weekly religious attendance presumes stable time, transportation, childcare, and trust in leadership—conditions that many no longer experience as givens. Under such pressures, the American Christian church as a centralized, program-heavy space often struggles to meet people where they actually live their lives. Formation once embedded in regular rhythms of shared place has become difficult to sustain.

Amidst this palpable shift, a steady increase in persons describing themselves as spiritual yet practicing outside institutional religion is taking place, including a measurable rise in those who identify with nature-based and pagan spiritualities.[5] In my interfaith rapport with local pagans,[6] I've found this resurgence rooted in more than a mere rejection of traditional spirituality. The rise of smaller, flexible, and place-responsive forms of gathering reflects not only an imaginative shift but a material reconfiguration of how religious life can be sustained today. These cultural and religious shifts do not simply empty out traditional religious spaces; they redistribute them. Ritual practice and spiritual attentions are migrating into parks, backyards, dinner tables, and improvised circles—places where people form memory, ritual competence, and moral imagination outside traditional religious scaffolding.

The renewed visibility of pagan practices does not simply signal an alternative spiritual marketplace. It illuminates how formation migrates when institutional trust weakens. New forms emerge (or old forms return) not because participants reject structure but because they seek forms of gathering that are flexible, relationally accountable, and responsive to place. These gatherings require minimal infrastructure, adapt easily to changing participation, and foreground shared attentiveness rather than institutional authority. In doing so, they offer a contrasting model of how space, ritual, and meaning can be held together under disrupted conditions. Formation that once assumed a single, stable locus of authority must now recognize plural, contested, and often improvisational contexts of formation. For reflective practitioners in Christian leadership, the significance of disruption may lie not in whether pagan practices are growing faster than church membership but in what they reveal about formation in a time of institutional fragility.

My goal is to explore one set of practices— the sacred circle—that is especially adaptive to this new topography. Sacred circles surface questions that Christian

communities cannot afford to ignore: What kinds of spaces cultivate trust? How is authority exercised and shared? What practices can form people when participation is intermittent rather than assumed? Framed this way, the sacred disruption points not to the end of Christian formation but to the unraveling of inherited forms and the invitation to discern new forms rooted in place, imagination, and practice. This is why the question before us is not merely nostalgic: *How do we restore sacred spaces?* The question is pedagogical: *How do leaders and teachers learn to read and shape these emergent places so that they form imagination, ethical responsibility, and communal discernment?*

PAGAN ORTHOPRAXY

In many traditions, ritual is not merely a way to talk about the world but a way to enter it. Pagan communities often trace circles of stones, fire, or joined hands to mark seasonal festivals or rites of passage, to tell origin stories, or to invoke spiritual or divine presence. The circle enacts a mythic truth: life is cyclical, time returns, and the divine meets us not at the top of a pyramid but at the center of a gathered people. Through ritual, belief is not only affirmed verbally but also apprenticed into muscle memory and communal habit.[7] Now, construction of the circular shape evokes a threshold**,** a border between the mundane and the mystical. With no corners and no front, the circle creates relational space where all participants are equidistant from the center and where none are elevated above the other. When people form a circle, they are not just organizing bodies but constructing meaning and shaping a container for the sacred. The circle embodies a theology that the sacred is not possessed but made present by how a community gathers. It is not difficult to see how the orthopraxy at play is, in fact, a kind of embodied theology, a way of saying, "This is who we are" by how we gather.[8]

A helpful example of this orthopraxy (practices in which right action matters at least as much as correct believing) can be witnessed on the winter solstice at one of the largest gatherings of practicing pagans in my area. Thousands gather to greet the rising sun at a popular vista, marking the turn toward longer days and the eventual coming of springtime. Wiccan rites proceed alongside the measured movements of nearby Druids. Families trail behind dancers and row after row of drummers. Children clutch crystals while elders swing incense. Some are adorned in the traditional dress of Indigenous peoples of North America, and others sparkle in neon novelties. While the utter diversity is striking and perhaps disorienting to some, all those present are participating in a singular practice that buries the long, dark nights of winter and celebrates hope with the rising of the sun. Even though these participants do not share a unifying confession, their shared practice nevertheless becomes a site of grace—gesturing toward a unity in experience. The pedagogical logic is simple but profound: the repetition of small, embodied acts forms capacities that words alone may not. Across the seasons, these repeated acts produce a communal memory, a repertoire of practices that members can draw from when faced with moral ambiguity or vocational distress.

For leaders and formation programs, there are three practical lessons here. First, ritual trains attention. A person who has practiced the art of turning toward a named element or listening in a timed silence will likely be better able to attend pastorally to another's suffering. This training is primarily somatic, not cognitive. Repeated practices of orienting the body (standing, facing a shared center, waiting in silence before speaking) may school participants in patience, restraint, and receptivity. Over time, these embodied disciplines recalibrate default responses to discomfort or urgency, enabling leaders to remain present rather than anxious or reactive when encountering another's shared pain.

Second, ritual distributes authority. Egalitarian speaking procedures and rotating roles cultivate humility and mutual accountability, competencies central to healthy practical leadership. Power redistribution across sacred circles I have witnessed is not assumed but practiced through specific constraints: shared silence before speech, ritualized procedures of taking turns, and naming explicit functions or facilitation roles. These customs do not eliminate informal hierarchies—charisma and cultural capital remain—but they do slow the consolidation of authority and create repeated opportunities for less dominant voices to be expressed. Egalitarianism here is aspirational and procedural rather than absolute.

Third, ritual integrates imagination and moral formation. Enacted storying (re-enacting a seasonal myth, for instance) habituates the imagination to narrative patterns that orient ethical choices. Such practices do not transmit moral instruction directly; they form moral sensibilities indirectly. By repeatedly inhabiting stories of loss, renewal, limitation, and hope, participants may learn to perceive their own lives through similar narrative lenses. Ethical discernment then emerges not only from rule-based reasoning but from a trained imagination able to recognize fitting responses within complex, ambiguous situations. In this way, imagination becomes a bridge between ritual memory and moral action.

SACRED PLACE

If pagan sacred circles teach how bodies learn to attend, Christian orthodoxy (right belief) may supply the grammar that orients and evaluates what that attention is directed toward. When I speak of Christian orthodoxy, I do so in reference not to a comprehensive doctrinal system or boundary-policing mechanism but to a normative orientation to the Christian claims of incarnation, sacramentality, and communal discernment. My reflections here are therefore situated, partial, and shaped by a particular stream of Christian practice—even as they seek resonance beyond it. Christian communities have learned to receive embodied practices under the judgment and promise of God's self-giving in Christ rather than allowing formative practices to determine meaning on their own terms. This belief is always received and practiced within particular traditions and histories, while orthodoxy maintains a regulative role of discerning which imaginative and ritual forms can be received as preparatory, which require transformation, and which

must be refused. As such, pagan orthopraxy is less an alternative theology and more a set of formative practices whose pedagogical power can be critically received within a Christian horizon without collapsing the distinction between practice and proclamation.

In Christianity, what is *sacred* often refers to that which is singled out by God and dedicated to God's purposes. Sacredness is not grounded primarily in human sentiment or moral intensity but in an ontological transformation brought about by divine proximity. Christian tradition does not view nature as inherently sacred. However, God may dwell in and through the natural via sacrament, theophany, and/or grace. The sacred is nevertheless ultimately personal as individuals and communities are drawn into communion with the triune God and not merely drawn toward awe or reverence. The sacred may include place, ritual, memory, and gesture, but it is always grounded in Christ as the incarnate presence.

The Christian claim that God is present in the incarnation and mediated to the Church in sacramental signs supplies both opportunity and constraint for any reception of non-Christian forms. Practically, this means that Christians may receive *forms* (boundary-making, ritual repetition, shared roles) insofar as those forms can be reinhabited in ways that direct toward the Church's confession about God's action in Christ, the economy of grace, and the moral shape of discipleship. Christian formation is shaped by the self-emptying of Christ and by an ecclesial hospitality that respects difference while confessing particular truth claims. This theological posture enables a humble, ethical reception of ritual forms while refusing the erasure of doctrinal distinctives.

There are concrete historical precedents for such reinhabitation. Celtic practices such as the *caim*—a spoken circle of protection and blessing—can be read as devotional boundary-making rather than as a rival cosmology. When reoriented within a Christian liturgical frame, the *caim*'s posture of blessing and protection has been linked to baptismal belonging, penitential discipline, and communal prayer. Early Irish monastics connected pagan orthopraxy with Christian orthodoxy when they borrowed the *cashel*—a concentric stone enclosure common in pagan civic life—to frame oratories and monastic cells. They thereby fused inherited spatial practice with the daily rhythm of prayer. In a similar way, St. Brigid's Well became both a folk pilgrimage site and a locus for Christian baptismal blessings.

In each case, orthopraxy and orthodoxy coalesce; orthopraxy teaches how story and relationship are enacted through the body while orthodoxy grounds those enactments in the incarnation of Christ. Together, they suggest that the making of sacred place is never a matter of architecture or technique alone but of practiced encounter—a choreography of myth and memory, belief and ritual, that draws human imagination toward a divine center.

C. S. LEWIS AND PAGAN MYTH

If pagan orthopraxy invites an enacted imagination, then C. S. Lewis supplies a theological language for receiving those enactments within Christian orthodoxy. In Lewis's language, ritual and myth can be "good dreams" that orient the soul toward the incarnation rather than rival it.[9] While ritual and myths do not yet articulate Christian truth, they nonetheless prepare the imagination to receive it, countering the fear that pre-Christian myth must compete with Christian revelation. A careful reception of Lewis's interpretive style involves three steps: (1) read: paying ethnographic attention to what the ritual actually does (who speaks, who is silent, what bodies do); (2) test: examining the practice within a Christian community against Christian theological commitments (about God, grace, and one's neighbor); and (3) reinhabit: reinhabiting useful forms in ways that serve Christian formation without erasing the originating community's integrity. This is not simple appropriation but a disciplined, accountable pedagogy of imagination consistent with Lewis's own conviction that true reception respects both the power of myth and the priority of incarnational truth.[10]

Rather than false beliefs awaiting theological correction (though still requiring theological discernment), these "good dreams" become avenues through which the imagination learns to desire incarnation, resurrection, and grace even before those realities are named theologically. Read in this light, sacred circles may function like Lewis's "good dreams." They form imaginative habits—narrative expectations, affective rhythms, and bodily postures—that can be either corrupted or received. For example, circles of druids in late autumn honor death and the preparatory dormancy of winter ahead of the new life of spring. Their rituals do not proclaim resurrection in Christian terms. They do, however, habituate participants to attend to cycles of loss and renewal, holding the ambivalence of death and hope at once, and to anticipate meaning beyond apparent endings. Such rituals, in Lewis's view, function as a good dream, tutoring the imagination toward themes of resurrection without requiring doctrinal agreement.

Across his work, Lewis insists that myth functions as an imaginative grammar. It rehearses longings, patterns desire, and trains the soul to recognize transcendent good. As Lewis explains in "Is Theology Poetry?" "What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is *about which* truth is)."[11] The myth, in a sense, points beyond itself to the fact it "prepares" or anticipates, a gift of imagination that has been sent by God to awaken our longing for the true center of sacred space: the incarnate presence of God. In practical formation, the Lewisian move is pedagogically fruitful: teach students to create a contextualized ritual the way a literary text is read—attending to form, affect, and *telos*—and then to name what it is that the ritual forms in human character (attentiveness, courage, grief, gratitude). This practice trains the theological imagination to discern what a place-making practice is forming and whether it can be put toward transformational use. The sacred circle becomes a tool for reflective prayer, for creating intentional space, and for awakening a sacramental vision

of God's presence woven through time, community, and creation. Christians may learn from the structural and formative power of pagan ritual forms without treating those forms as doctrinal substitutes.[12]

A SECOND CIRCLE

All eyes settled on me, but there was no pulpit to inhabit—only a wooden table encircled by friends and neighbors. We called it our "scripture circle." Local families gathered to take turns igniting a moment, bringing a meal and questions rather than a sermon. Tonight, the flame that emerged at the center of our conversations was our shared hunger for real forgiveness.

We began by each naming our experiences of the last week—"wounded," "released," "hopeful," "unsteady"—and then kindled questions that felt both urgent and vulnerable: Who truly benefits when we forgive? Who is forgiveness really for? What are our barriers to being forgiving? How should forgiveness make us feel? How does mercy wrestle with justice? The clatter of dishes from the kitchen and the soft babble of children weaving between our chairs did not disturb us; these sounds anchored us in the commotion of real life.

There is no place to hide in a circle, so sitting at our table comes at a cost—no benchwarmers here. Each voice carried weight and dignity. I spoke of a rift with an old friend; another confessed a quiet regret. As we leaned in—shoulder to shoulder, knee brushing knee—our stories wove together, the courage of one confession sparking another. Each story lit a path for the next and emboldened every voice in turn. Scripture surfaced not as an abstract text but as water poured into our hands, cleansing wounds we had named aloud. By the time we rose, the conversation's candle flame had burned low, but something new glowed in the space between us. We left with a gentle gravity—an invitation to act on the truth we had mined together. In this humble, circular "church," sacred space was not a building but a living pattern of listening, speaking, and imagining grace into actionable forgiveness.

A VOCATION OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What I witnessed around that table was not accidental but the fruit of intentional practice and care for leadership. Sacred places arise as a response to an invitation and as an act of consecration. They are both responsive and constructed. Who is at work in constructing sacred space today? Perhaps pastors, priests, chaplains, doulas, spiritual directors, shamans, teachers, even artists come to mind. Crafters of sacred space are not architects of control but careful custodians of meaning; they are meaning-makers, even place-makers if you will.

Behind each sacred circle is a circle-maker, the person who discerns, convenes and holds a space for the divine to meet the created. Theologically, this circle-maker is less an architect and more a custodian of reciprocity. They respond, invite attention to the center, and then step back into the circle as presence emerges. For many pagans, this vocation stewards relational presence by invoking local spirits and/or directions, cultivating reciprocal obligations between people and place, and enacting rites that connect

community memory to particular stories and landscapes. In Christian practice, this vocation cooperates with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, utilizing sign and symbol to tend to the borders of space. Neither practitioner seeks to control the confines of encounter. Sacred space is not a stage. It is a threshold. This role requires special humility, an acknowledgement that true sacredness requires attention, not human cleverness. It also begs a pastoral imagination: the capacity to shape patterns of gathering that foster an attentiveness, mutuality, and transformation. The Celtic monastics saw this and turned practice into vocation. C. S. Lewis reminds us that truth becomes beautiful only when it is believed and that symbols draw their power from the reality they reflect.[13] The sacred place-maker, then, is not an artist of sentiment but a caretaker of truth embodied. Whether in mentoring groups, ritual design, chaplaincy, or spiritual direction, the work of constructing sacred circles is a liturgical action.

If the circle-maker shapes place, the circle itself shapes how we think, feel, and attend. At its best, a circle is a pedagogical technology, a repeatable set of moves that trains the theological imagination and creates the conditions for disciplined, communal reflection. Reflective practice is often associated with the cultivation of professional wisdom through disciplined reflection on action. I am using the term here to name a communal and ritualized form of meaning-making that is equally disciplined, though not limited to professional roles. Sacred circles function as reflective practices insofar as they structure attention, invite interpretation, and subject experience to shared discernment over time. Meaning-making, in this account, is the raw human capacity; reflective practice is its intentional, formative expression. Below are five distinct ways a sacred circle conditions reflective practice:

1. Names and Contains Context: Drawing a visible boundary (stones, tape, chairs, or an imagined boundary) enhances our ability to engage context-based reflection. It creates a liminal area in which real-world challenges and hopes surface. Placing these concerns in the central space where they may be objectively observed by multiple parties encourages the objective point of view generated in a "third space."[14] Altering our point of view in this way creates a slowing effect where the circle trains us to pause before responding, inviting the imagination to map both our questions and our possibilities.
2. Shapes Posture and Attention: With no front row or pulpit, every gaze turns inward or toward one another. Bodies incline inward, eyes meet eyes, and listening becomes our default posture. In that egalitarian space, imaginative empathy flourishes. As one person names a struggle, others resonate through emotional-contagion, co-regulation, and narrative identification. Such social and psychological processes help listeners imagine themselves within another's story and respond with care. Over time, the embodied attunement trains a pastoral sensitivity with which leaders learn to hold another's experience without a sense of urgency to repair or provide solutions.[15]

3. Redistributes Power for Cultural Competence: Equidistant proximity invites all voices to speak and be heard. No voice is given the right to dominate, and every perspective around the circle, including those often otherwise marginalized, is granted equal welcome. As eyes move around the circle, returning again and again to the presence of others, the effect is both humbling and connective. Every individual is responsible for their presence. Imagination here becomes the bridge across difference, helping everyone present to picture the lived experiences of others and weave them into the communal discernment.
4. Centers Transformation through Ritual Rhythm: The ritual rhythm of opening with silence or a question, pausing for story, and closing with a blessing mark the circle as "other space." This rhythm trains disposition rather than merely informs intellect. Small, regular enactments cultivate steadiness, restraint, and pastoral imagination over time, gradually reconfiguring participants' attention, desire, and moral responses.
5. Invites Creative Discernment: The circle awakens fresh metaphors and unexpected connection as communities try on responses to moral, pastoral, or communal dilemmas. Through repeated ritual moves, participants enact a response and observe how those moves shape feeling, posture, speech, and relational dynamics. Because enactment exposes both benefits and harms, experiments include explicit intentions, requests for permission when forms draw on other communities' rituals, and a structured debriefing that names what the practice formed. In practice, the circle contains a laboratory for moral imagination while training leaders to invent and evaluate within a communal dynamic.

Taken together these functions show how sacred circles may cultivate precisely the capacity reflective practice seeks to develop in spiritual leaders: meaning-making that is intentionally structured, community tested, and oriented toward formation. For the work of formation, this means embedding short, repeatable circle practices into curricula (supervision groups, field placements, worship labs, etc.) and coupling each practice with theological framing and ethical reflection so students learn how a practice works and why it is meaningful and intelligible.

Sacred circles are not quaint survivals but robust place-making exercises that train the imagination, redistribute authority through embodied orthopraxy, and create liminality where reflection and leadership formation can genuinely take root. Read as an interfaith encounter rather than a cultural salvage operation, sacred circles offer concrete, testable resources for Christian formation. For example, the pagan circle's rotating facilitation can be employed in pastoral supervision to decentralize authority and cultivate mutual accountability. A Gaelic *caim*-style blessing can be taught as a catechistically framed prayer before a ministry practicum rather than as an unexamined charm. Seasonal storying (ritual narrative rehearsals common to many vernacular rites) can be retooled to train seminary cohorts in imaginative theological reflection without

collapsing doctrinal boundaries. Such Christian reception requires deliberate safeguards—permission, attribution, theological testing, and institutional oversight—but when carried out with humility and doctrinal clarity, it can enlarge the practitioner's repertoire for forming leaders who can read places well, listen deeply, and translate felt encounters with the sacred into sustained service.

NOTES

[1] Exodus 3:1–6. Moses is drawn into a holy space by the light of a burning bush that is not consumed by the fire. Told to remove his sandals, the place he is drawn within has a central fire as the axis mundi of the divine encounter.

[2] Gallup, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup, 2023, accessed September 1, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx.

[3] Gregory A. Smith et al., *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off*, 2025, Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/02/PR_2025.02.26_religious-landscape-study_report.pdf; Public Religion Research Institute, *2023 PRRI Census of American Religion: County-Level Data on Religious* Identity and Diversity, 2024, https://prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PRRI_Dec_2024_Religion_final-1.pdf.

[4] Ted A. Smith proposes the fascinating historical argument that much of American Christian formation has historically developed within a model of voluntary association that assumes stable participation, institutional trust, and discretionary time. See Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education* (Eerdmans, 2018), 19–33.

[5] As of 2024, national surveys estimate that approximately 0.7 percent of American adults identify as pagan, Wiccan, or members of other nature-based spiritual traditions. Smith et al., *Decline of Christianity*, 32. Comparable categories were rarely measured in national surveys before the early 2000s. However, sociological estimates and early religious identification studies suggest that such traditions represented well under 0.1 percent of the U.S. population at that time, indicating a significant increase over the past three decades. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey: Summary Report (ARIS 2008)* (Trinity College, 2009), 6–9, https://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf. Parallel studies further indicate broad generational shifts toward noninstitutional forms of spirituality, particularly in the cohort of Americans aged 18–39. Public Religion Research Institute, *2023 PRRI Census*, 8–9.

However, these figures likely underestimate solitary practitioners whose dispersed, unregistered practices are difficult to capture through conventional survey instruments. See Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone* (of South Carolina Press, 2019); Helen A. Berger and James R. Lewis, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (University of South Carolina Press, 2019).

[6] I am using "pagan" to refer to the living, earth-centered lineages that trace back through folk memory and place. In view of the great diversity of traditions at play, many friends who practice earth-centered or reconstructionist rites now simply adopt the name of "pagan" or a specific

tradition's name (e.g., Druid, Heathen, Wiccan), seeing the title "neopagan" as implying inauthenticity or novelty where continuity exists with ancestral pathways. In an attempt to honor this sentiment and the diversity at play, I simply employ "pagan" in this reflection.

[7] For examples of vernacular ritual language and boundary-making blessings from Gaelic practice, see Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*, ed. C. J. Moore (Floris Books, 2020), 124–26.

[8] Paul Cudby, *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest's Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice* (Christian Alternative, 2017), 13–14.

[9] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2001), 50; C. S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (HarperCollins, 1976), 130.

[10] Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," 67.

[11] C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 66.

[12] A note on power and appropriation is essential. Pagan practices are diverse, situated, and often bound to particular communities and histories. Learning from these practices requires humility, permission, and responsible translation—taking neither sacred objects nor whole liturgies without invitation. The goal of a Christian reception should be creative fidelity—to receive structural forms (boundary-making, repetition, shared roles, etc.) and to reinhabit them in ways that respect their original communities and maintain theological integrity.

[13] Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?," 133–34.

[14] Steven J. Sandage and Jeannine K. Brown, *Relational Integration of Psychology and Christian Theology* (Routledge, 2018), 64–66.

[15] Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain* (W. W. Norton, 2006), chaps. 2–3. On co-regulation, see Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (Guilford Press, 2012). On interpersonal neurobiology, see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2007).