



12-31-2018

Between Identity and Truth: A Christ-Centered Perspective on Emotion

Mauro Properzi

Brigham Young University, mauro_properzi@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp>

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Properzi, Mauro (2018) "Between Identity and Truth: A Christ-Centered Perspective on Emotion," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 39 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol39/iss1/5>

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Between Identity and Truth: A Christ-Centered Perspective on Emotion

Cover Page Footnote

Mauro Properzi, Associate Professor of World Religions, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mauro Properzi, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602. Email: mauro_properzi@byu.edu

Between Identity and Truth: A Christ-Centered Perspective on Emotion

MAURO PROPERZI

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

Emotions are receiving a lot of attention in both academic and popular circles. In fact, our culture is increasingly characterized by emotionality in thought, expression, and personal interaction, with some positive but also many negative consequences. How should Christians respond to these developments in the secular culture? A Christ-centered approach to the emotions is the general theological foundation on which we need to ground our reflections and decisions about their nature and significance. Specifically, by deepening our understanding of Jesus's teachings on His identity, telos, life-giving reality, and sanctifying power, as aptly described in John 14:6, we may experience a transforming communion with Christ, which will then play a central role in emotional coping, regulation, and flourishing.
Keywords: emotion, John 14:6, Jesus Christ, way, truth, Christ-centered, psychotherapy

Princeton scholar Robert P. George (2016; cited in *The Wheatley Institution*, 2016) has characterized our era as “the age of feeling.” Whatever other label we choose to identify this particular period of Western history (modern, late modern, postmodern, post-Christian, etc.), it is clear that an ethos of increased emotionality is what distinguishes the present day from the past, even our most recent past. Not only are we more interested, even obsessed, with the definition, examination, categorization, and contextualization of emotional phenomena, as witnessed by the proliferation of academic literature on the subject, we have also given the emotions more existential, epistemic, ethical, and communicative authority in personal interactions and cultural expressions of different kinds (Barrett, Lewis, & Haviland-Jones, 2018). In other words, emotions have taken center stage in much of what we see, hear, and do. They increasingly define life as we know it and shape its 21st-century protagonists, both individually and collectively, for better or for worse.

This growth of emotionality is not new in its popular manifestations since public displays of human emotions have characterized most historical periods. Emotions are inherent to being human, so there are no emotionless eras in the human experience. However, the proliferation of an emotional ethos in cultural dimensions that have traditionally been critical or suspicious of the emotions is quite novel. Throughout history, philosophers, theologians, and intellectuals of different stripes have tended to emphasize a separation between the rational superior self (or soul) and the brute animallike side of the individual as manifested in the “unenlightened” emotional life. With

Mauro Properzi, Associate Professor of World Religions, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mauro Properzi, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602. Email: mauro_properzi@byu.edu

some notable exceptions, David Hume being one of them, reason has traditionally been given the primary spot in juxtaposition to affective phenomena, thus enjoying a mostly uncontested role as the ideal foundation for epistemology, ethics, and social organizations of different kinds (Dixon, 2003; Plamper, 2017). Today, this separation and hierarchy is being questioned and reversed.

In many ways, the present challenge to the deep-seated antiemotion bias among the intellectuals of both past and present is a needed corrective to what clearly appears to be a simplistic picture of affective reality. The stark separation between rationality and emotionality proposed by many a philosopher is not real because emotions represent complex interactions of feelings and cognitions characterized by recurrent feedback loops among perceptions, values, objectives, memories, etc. In short, emotions are more important, more valuable, and not inherently “irrational” as some may have made them to be (Power & Dalglish, 2016). Yet, the pendulum may have swung in the opposite direction if emotions are now treated as preeminent over reason and independent in value and existence from rationality. Perhaps few would be willing to bluntly affirm this conclusion, but in practice we are witnessing a move in this direction in realms as varied as higher education, social policy, law, mass communication, etc. (Longenecker, 2014).

The current growth of emotionalism in society, and the ethical emotivism that accompanies it, is certainly complex in origin and manifestation (Stets & Turner, 2014). It intersects with a number of cultural and intellectual movements, patterns, and worldview developments that are hard to disentangle and evaluate in terms of their relative weight to the emergence of greater emotionalism. Some of these perspectives may provide insights on causation, but others simply offer descriptions of the present emotional ethos from a particular angle. For example, Charles Taylor (1992) points to “authenticity” (p. 16) and Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton (2007) to “expressive individualism” (p. 27) as foundations of the emotion-based morality that we regularly encounter among “radically autonomous” (p. 80) individuals in our society. Christian Smith (2009) identifies “moralistic therapeutic deism” (p. 162) as the overall flavor of the popular emotivist religiosity of this generation,

whereas *identity politics* underlines the power that emerges from the bonding glue of shared characteristics, including feelings, in forming and polarizing emotion-based groups (Wiarda, 2014, pp. 150–151). In all, it appears we are facing a phenomenon that is more rooted in diverse, though related, reactions to the tensions of our age than in a specific trajectory of internal philosophical coherence (see also MacIntyre, 2007).

To be fair, if greater emotionality resulted in increased empathy and more compassionate individuals, we would have reasons to celebrate. When emotionality leads to these interpersonal realities, we should recognize its positive effects. However, current emotional dynamics also highlight much that is worrisome, potentially destructive, and in need of correction. Indeed, greater prominence of the emotions does not generally equate to increased kindness, unselfishness, and sacrifice for the community. In outlining the rise of expression for most recognized emotions, historian of emotion Peter Stearns (2018) recognizes that “emotions that transcend the self, in harmony with others, have not experienced the same wide popularity” (para. 18). Increased polarization, isolation, verbal aggression, and shaming in our society are some of the byproducts of this triumph of emotionality. Mental health problems are also on the rise and have been for several years (Twenge et al., 2010). While the relationship between mental illness and emotionology (the standards of a society toward emotions and their expressions) is complex, it seems evident that the current climate of emotionality does not facilitate emotional health, at least in some respects.

I see fundamental problems in current secular approaches to the emotions, particularly as manifested in the growing distance between the existential assumptions that underlie these methods and Christian perspectives on life, reality, human nature, and humanity’s destiny. My objective is to propose an alternative, namely a general Christ-centered conceptualization of the emotions that is based on the unique existential background and *telos* provided by Christianity as an ontological system that promises joyful salvation. To think *Christianly* about the emotions is undoubtedly the objective of Christian scholars, therapists, and intellectuals of faith; yet, the challenge in achieving this lofty goal is not only practical, but also intellectual.

Books have been devoted to this topic, and more will certainly be written, to describe theologies of emotion with particular areas of emphasis and from different denominational perspectives (Borgman, 2009; Ravasi, 2014; Roberts, 2007; Williams, 2011). Some of my own work has focused on the emotions in the specific theological context of Mormonism (Properzi 2018, in press).

My present focus is much broader and briefer. I aim to contrast key perspectives on the emotions rooted in secular humanism with one of the most well-known New Testament statements attributed to Jesus. In John 14:6 (King James Version), the Savior describes Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life.” This messianic statement, while not directly related to the emotions, has implications for how humans choose to interpret them, particularly in the contexts of epistemology, identity, and teleology. At the very least, this scripture reminds Christians what emotions are *not*: They are not independent measures of truth, identity, or destiny. In other words, emotions cannot transcend or be separated from Christ, they can only be integrated into a wider system of reality that centers on Him.

IDENTITY

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” is one of the seven “I am” statements contained in the book of John. In other circumstances and sermons, Jesus also identifies Himself as the *bread of life*, the *light of the world*, the *door*, the *good shepherd*, the *resurrection and the life*, and the *vine*. Each of these identifications has been subjected to extensive interpretation and commentary throughout history, given the significance of all these images and labels in highlighting distinct aspects of Jesus’s life, identity, and messianic mission (Martin & Wright, 2015; Ridderbos, 1997). At the same time, the predicates are not necessarily the exclusive or primary features of these declarations. The Savior’s claim to divinity is suggested repeatedly in the subject and copula, which clearly echo Old Testament expressions of the divine name. Indeed, “God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14). Jesus’s identification with God may not be as intentional in the seven statements as it

is when Jesus uses the “I AM” expression in an absolute sense (John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19). Still, the gospels as a whole affirm both His divinity and the meaning of that divinity for us.

Jesus’s claim that He is the Son of God has powerful and radical implications for all who desire to follow Him. The “I am” statements point to or allude to some of these implications. A key message that emerges from all their descriptive images is the centrality of Christ’s identity over our identities. While in some New Testament passages the Savior teaches His disciples to be individuals of a certain character (the Sermon on the Mount is one such setting), He does not seem to be concerned with the issue of identity as a source of personal comfort, stability, pride, or continuity. To the contrary, Jesus repeatedly emphasizes the need to shift our focus from our own identity to His. He does so by providing several descriptions of His divine identity, as found in the “I am” statements, so that we may know in whom we are placing our trust. Indeed, He makes it clear that our own identity, which includes our will, must die or be “swallowed up” in His in order for our lives to be truly free, meaningful, and eternal (Mosiah 15:7).

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24; also Luke 9:23). This ideal of self-denial, one of the core teachings of Christianity, has been discussed and variously applied in a number of spiritual or theological directions throughout history. Certainly, asceticism, whether in terms of poverty, celibacy, or fasting, has been one such interpretative direction. However, the religious or consecrated life continues to be the vocation of only a minority of Christians while also being limited to the Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity. A broader principle exists, which lay Christians can apply daily and in different historical and cultural settings: the rejection of a life of hedonism and the embracing of a service-oriented existence (Bonhoeffer, 2017). Disagreement and differences may exist on the exact boundary between acceptable self-care and unacceptable self-indulgence, but most would agree that self-denial is not a palatable message for the modern world. Christians need to recognize this philosophical and moral conflict and be wary of the tendency to accommodate to the new secular orthodoxy of the ruling self (Reno, 2017).

A world that rejects identity “in Christ” is likely to naturally develop two parallel obsessions: first, the “discovery” or “creation” of a unique personal identity, and second, the removal of any obstacle, whether biological, cultural, or legal, that could hamper the expression of that same identity (Esolen, 2016; Tollefson, 2015). Clearly, the process of “identity formation” is natural and necessary to human development since it is rooted in key relationships and attachments with family members, communities, religious groups, nations, and God. Yet, when negative experiences, mistrust, and cultural deconstruction challenge one or more of these relationships, the individual may turn inward and attach inordinate importance to the life of emotions in order to find himself or herself. In a post-modern context where all “external” truths are deconstructed and rejected, emotions become authoritative because they are viewed as expressions of a personal identity, which is to be defended as the one good and the one truth that prevents existential loss and despair. Thus, emotions that are valued and singled out as “definers” of a personal story or identity are strengthened and given the power to reemerge repeatedly to shape individual perceptions of reality.

These cultural patterns will influence individuals to different extents as a result of various levels of emotional health and other factors. Psychologists are aware of these dynamics as they recognize that focusing on particular thoughts and emotions, even when attempting to eliminate them, can strengthen the presence and influence of these very thoughts and emotions. Indeed, rumination and identification with emotions can further imprison the individual in negative emotional patterns of anxiety and depression (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2003). Steven Hayes’s Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), for example, is built on the core principles of separation from and observation of the emotions in order to better experience and regulate them. ACT proposes nonidentification with a particular emotional experience through mindfulness (to remove personal attachment) as the solution to negative affective patterns. By teaching clients that they are not their emotions and thoughts, ACT is resonant of Buddhist philosophical foundations that broadly reject cravings and attachments of all kinds, including possessive desires for a permanent identity (Gordon & Borushok, 2017; Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2016).

Two questions emerge from this discussion. First, if our emotions and thoughts do not define who we are, then *who* and *what* are we? And second, why should an approach that negates identification with the emotions be applied only to negative distressing emotions and thoughts as opposed to all emotions (as ACT seems to suggest)? This latter question finds an answer in the overall secular humanist objective of psychotherapy, which aims to ameliorate mental pathology, as manifested in clients’ perceived life dysfunctions, as opposed to pursuing absolute truth, philosophical coherence, spiritual growth, etc. as necessary means or ends of the process (Gantt, 2005). Hence, emotions with negative valence will usually be the focus of prevailing deficit-oriented approaches in psychotherapy vis-à-vis interventions that spring out of positive psychology. To the first question on the core of personal identity, ACT responds by replacing emotions and thoughts with personal values, so as to facilitate coherence between a person’s declared priorities and objectives and his/her choices, actions, and emotional experiences. This is a valuable objective in the client-centered practice of humanistic psychotherapy, but is it sufficient?

When the development of the therapeutic relationship warrants it, a counseling experience firmly rooted in a Christian worldview can expand beyond these initial considerations. For the Christian, at least two additional questions emerge if values are placed at the center of personal identity. First, are personal values in line with Christ’s values, as embodied in His life and teachings? And second, does identification with Christian values correspond to self-emptying and the taking of Jesus’s identity upon oneself, or does it lead to the inflation of the ego and personal pride? The answer to the first question may vary based on level of conversion, experience, and devotion. It is important to remember that “values” do not simply express intellectual beliefs; they represent what individuals love deeply and pursue holistically in different dimensions of their lives. Given the high demands of a truly Christian life, it is then difficult for any Christian to envision full consistency between personal actions and Christian values as a realistic possibility.

This is where the answer to the second question is significant and where Christianity stops short of claiming that individual coherence represents the ultimate goal. While different theological perspectives stress unique areas of emphasis, all claim that the absorbing of Christ’s identity involves more than first

possessing the right values and then expressing them in action. To become Christlike is to experience the deeply transforming power of Christ, also known as sanctification, as comprehensively as possible. Values thus cease functioning as objects to possess and defend as components of our egos; instead, they function as expressions of a sanctified identity, which is welcomed rather than attained. By viewing our identity as both desired and gifted, we then see our emotions differently. Emotions cease to be markers of our own valued self to cling to or defend against; instead, they become observable responses, whether desirable or not, to the all-consuming reality of Christ's love (Rolheiser, 2003, 2015). For Christians, the core message is that emotions should not be self-referential but Christ-referential, markers of a self in transformation and in union with its Source rather than as ultimate sources of a distinctive identity to affirm.

THE WAY . . . AND THE LIFE

To say that we should not identify with our emotions is not to say that emotions are irrelevant to the Christian life or that we need not be conscious of them. It is, instead, to recognize them as means rather than as ends in themselves. A number of problems we witness in our society are deepened by the perception of emotions as ultimate objectives to pursue or as experiences to obsess about. Addictions, attritions, and aggressions often feed on frustrations that result from the absence or interruption of desirable emotions and the emergence of undesirable ones. To feel safe, good, happy, and without suffering *now* has become the priority over reason, biology, wisdom, and divine morality or commands. Indeed, personal emotional well-being, whatever the means, has become the new morality. In this context, tolerance is the greatest virtue and intolerance the greatest vice because the former facilitates this objective and the latter hampers it (Crenshaw, 2015). Unfortunately, for the many who suffer from emotional disorders, this state of affairs means that they will experience the added pressure of failed emotional expectations, being anxious about being anxious or depressed about being depressed.

Christianity does not reject peace, happiness, and even pleasure as worthwhile experiences of life, neither does it elevate suffering as an experience to pursue. However, nowhere in Jesus's message is the production

and enjoyment of a particular emotional experience the goal, either in the present or in the eternities. Christ promises peace and the "abundant" life, but He also warns about the reality of persecution, reviling, family strife, "the sword," and even martyrdom for those who choose to follow Him (Matt. 5:11; 10:34–38; John 10:10; 15:18–21). Indeed, the Savior points to being and becoming rather than experiencing as the core of the Christian way. To put it differently, feeling a particular way or having certain experiences represent byproducts of the journey, not the destination proper. This is a message that even Christians may fail to notice given the cultural reality that surrounds us where Christianity can easily be conceptualized as the means to happiness rather than the other way around. But Christ will not be used as an instrument to personal satisfaction, just like He did not allow Himself to be used as a means to political ends by some of His first-century compatriots.

When Jesus said that He is the way and the life, He affirmed that both the destination and the journey, the end and the means, are to be found in Him. The *telos* is made clear enough by the addendum that follows the "I am" statement: "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Eternal life, or existence in the presence of God the Father, will come only through the instrumentality of the Son's mediation as fully accepted by its human beneficiaries. To be sure, this is not and cannot be a legal, objectifying, utilitarian instrumentality that exists purely to be used and discarded once the goal is achieved. The mediation is an existential, transformative, and identity-shaping process that culminates eschatologically in the presence (with everything else that may be associated with it) of *both* the Father and the Son. Hence, Christ is truly not only the means, but also Himself, the end of the process of salvation.

Given the highly dynamic nature of this salvific journey and the unique nature of Jesus's mediation, the development of Christian soteriology is deeply centered in the present. The Savior is not only the *way* to eternal life but also the *way* to true abundant life in the here and now (Clayton, 2016). Furthermore, not only can He be the defining characteristic of a life lived in the eternities but also of our lives and identities in mortality. If Christians truly approach life in this way, their emotional lives, as well as emotional evaluations and regulation, will be clearly affected by these realities.

Since emotions are “concern-based construals” that integrate a number of cognitive-affective realities in the individual (memories, sensory perceptions, appraisals, genetic predispositions, etc.), emotions, as a whole, emerge from the *totality* of the person (Roberts, 2007, pp. 11–31). Similarly, Christ invites the *totality* of the person into Himself, and the emotions resulting from this transformation are molded accordingly.

One of the reasons why the Christian message underlies detachment from distinctive forms of personal identity that need defending is that these identities give rise to certain emotions. Even very positive and functional identities trigger pride, anger, and selfishness when clung to as personal possessions. However, truly taking Christ’s identity upon ourselves, as a loving sharable gift rather than as a personal possession, opens our eyes to the real us, whose origin and destiny is with God. This view will shape our perceptions of all reality, thus giving rise to “truer” emotions, namely emotions rooted in deeper eternal realities. Margaret Silf, a British writer, presents this concept with an effective image in stating that we see our shadow when we face away from a source of light, but our perception is not as impeded when we face the light’s source (2007, pp. 67–69). Similarly, if we pursue our identities and kingdoms rather than His kingdom, we will not find peace because we will not be our real selves. In Jesus’s words, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered” (John 15:5–6).

Then, spiritual discernment rather than the glorification of or identification with the emotions is the truly liberating approach to emotional phenomena. Do our emotions lead us toward God or away from Him? Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th-century Spanish founder of the Society of Jesus, provided much direction in this regard through his *Spiritual Exercises*, which continue to be practiced today by Catholics and non-Catholics alike (Tetlow, 2009). Ignatius used the terms *consolation* and *desolation* to describe individuals’ orientations toward and away from God respectively. His starting point was a recognition of the coexistence of two conflicting dimensions within the human being where a desire for God is counterbalanced by sinful pride that pushes us away from Him. Good and bad

spirits, or we could say emotions, enter this picture to attach themselves to our existing moods, or emotional states, and either facilitate or push against consolation and desolation. A key objective of the exercises is to discern these spiritual or emotional movements and to act toward them in freedom rather than react to them in slavery (Tetlow, 2016).

To put it differently, the *Spiritual Exercises* aim to align the emotions that emerge within us with our deep desire for God, manifested in love, as opposed to the isolating fear that sins against Him and our fellow beings. Rather than using an emotion’s affective quality as the ultimate measuring standard, the objective is to facilitate an enduring state of consolation against which the emotions are then to be discerned. It is a matter of focus rather than feeling. Silf (2007) explains it thus:

Consolation is not the same as happiness. It is possible to be in consolation, and very close to God, at times of real objective pain . . . The feel-good factor, as cultivated by politicians in particular, and its counterpart of feeling low, is intrinsically focused on ourselves. Things happen in our own kingdoms that trigger these ups and downs . . . And the difference seems to lie in the focus of the experience. Spiritual consolation is experienced when our hearts are drawn toward God, even if, as we have seen, this happens in circumstances that the world would regard as negative . . . Consolation is the experience of this deep connectedness to God, and it fills our being with a sense of peace and joy. (pp. 86–88)

While consolation will usually be accompanied by feelings of peace and joy, the affective experience itself cannot function as the objective because it would then operate as a manifestation of the self-focus typical of desolation. In other words, since the Savior is the only end, emotion, even a state of peace and joy, should be only a means in reaching the true objective of connection with Him.

At the root of the *Spiritual Exercises* lies a recognition that the default condition of human beings is one of internal division and fragmentation between the divine image of our creation and the fallen sinfulness that results from post-Fall mortality. Emotions, in this context, are neutral manifestations of deeper realities, namely our core desires and fears, rather than markers of enduring individualities. It follows that the individual who is properly oriented toward

God, namely the one who regularly communes with the spiritual source of life, will act through and on the emotions rather than succumbing to their rule. This endeavor will certainly be accompanied by moments of discouragement and defeat since fears often emerge in our internal hierarchies as predominant over our desire for God. Yet, if emotions and their energies can be so directed as to be “infused” by our core longing for communion with God, the root desires and fears that shape emotions are eventually going to be transformed to give rise to more positive emotions. As Paul reminds us, when the Spirit guides, its emotional fruits are “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal. 5:22–23).

The message of Christianity is very hopeful in this regard because no matter how deeply a person may have fallen into chronic desolation or how strongly he may have “quenched” the spirit within, the “Spirit” that links us with God will make “intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26). By drawing us toward God subtly in ways that may not always be understood, even with deep disappointments in experiencing the “prize” of fears and attachments, consolation beckons us with its radical message that true peace and joy are found only in death of self and rebirth in Christ. Perhaps to increase the magnetic power of our longing for Him, God also ensures that while we may find rest in the consoling effects of His Spirit, we are also unable to ever completely satisfy our desire for Him (Simpson, 2018). Yet, mystics and saints for generations have recognized that this is not an enervating desire, but a deeply fulfilling and satisfying one.

With no expectation of having all our emotional needs fulfilled in this life, we then look to Christ as the source of our most enduring positive emotions, a perspective that in turn orders and focuses all the other moods and emotions. These emotions are “spiritual” because their cognitive and affective contents emerge in the context of an ongoing personal relationship with a saving Christ, as manifested through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Virtues thus grow and negative emotions are bathed in the light of the eternal paradigm of love, which emanates through the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus. Christ is the way to the abundant emotional life; He is also that same life through the power of the Spirit. A Catholic mystic summarized

this comprehensive effect of the life in Christ in the following words:

To the man who gives himself up to the guidance of the Holy Ghost, there seems to be no world; to the world there seems to be no God . . . We must therefore find out by whom we are led. If it is not by the Holy Ghost, we labor in vain; there is no substance nor savour in anything we do. If it is by the Holy Ghost, we taste a delicious sweetness . . . it is enough to make us die of pleasure! (Vianney, n.d., para. 4; also see Pratt, 1978, pp. 96–97)

Hence, while a solid Christian spirituality is not the answer to every emotional problem, the sanctification of the emotions is the Christian counterpart of their modern glorification.

THE TRUTH

The culture in which we now live has been labeled “post-Christian” and “post-truth,” a term that was selected in 2016 as the Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year (“Word of the year,” 2016; Murray, 2018). Particularly in the realm of morality, we see an increase of relativistic perspectives that underlie an ethical epistemology of radical autonomy and feeling-based truth. In commenting on Christian Smith’s *Lost in Transition*, a study on the moral decision-making of emerging adults, New York Times opinionist David Brooks (2011) stated that, for many of the interviewed youth,

moral thinking didn’t enter the picture, even when considering things like drunken driving, cheating in school or cheating on a partner. ‘I don’t really deal with right and wrong that often,’ is how one interviewee put it. The default position, which most of them came back to again and again, is that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. ‘It’s personal,’ the respondents typically said. ‘It’s up to the individual. Who am I to say?’ Rejecting blind deference to authority, many of the young people have gone off to the other extreme: ‘I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel.’ . . . As one put it, ‘I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.’ (para. 5; see also Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011)

The moral dimension is not the only one affected by the triumph of radical autonomy. An existentialist approach to life's meaning has even been inscribed in Supreme Court legal decisions, including the idea that liberty is "the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" (Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey, 1992).

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) sees the malaise of our age as deriving at least in part from a "culture of authenticity" that can easily deviate into narcissism. While authenticity as such is not the core problem, it becomes so if rooted in self-determining freedom *from* outside influences, particularly from such important social contexts as family, tradition, religion, and community (See Smith, 2014). This "self-making" individual is the philosophical progeny of a number of different thinkers, including Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Nietzsche, and others, as well as the product of the ideology of liberalism, particularly in its most recent excesses. Books continue to debate the extent to which modern liberalism or Enlightenment philosophies are the cause of the problem, but for Christians the decline of religious faith has also precipitated Western society's sickness (Deneen, 2018a; Gregory, 2015). Alexis de Tocqueville had presciently predicted some of these developments almost two centuries ago when he warned that individualism is a sickness peculiar to the human heart in democratic times (de Tocqueville, 2004, pp. 585–595; Burtka, 2017).

De Tocqueville saw religion in America as an important counterbalance to the threats of individualism and materialism in liberal societies. Indeed, when Christianity and liberalism coexisted in balanced strength, a social contract that valued both differences and unity was possible. In the words of Notre Dame professor Patrick Deneen (2018b),

For Christianity, difference is ordered toward unity. For liberalism, unity is valued insofar as it promotes difference . . . Today our unity is understood almost entirely in the light of our differences. We come together—to celebrate diversity. And today, the celebration of diversity ends up serving as a mask for power and inequality. (p. 32)

If the public sphere is "freed" from the influence and voice of Christian values and virtues and if God ceases

to exist as a plausible source of truth, then the truth that will be created will be in our own image and according to our own will. Ultimately, it will be an illusion based on a false idea of freedom. "A false view of freedom as unimpeded choice and self-definition has led to a deregulation of culture more consequential than market deregulation. . . . It's not for me to make myself into whatever I wish. God, not my sovereign will, is the Supreme Being" (Reno, 2016, pp. 3, 7; see also Payne, 2017).

Christianity, then, sees freedom differently. It is certainly freedom *from* something, specifically sin and death, but it is also freedom *for* or *to* something, namely God. Saint Thomas Aquinas reflected extensively on this subject, ultimately seeing freedom as *freedom for excellence*. As George Weigel (2002) observes,

Freedom, for St. Thomas, is a means to human excellence, to human happiness, to the fulfillment of human destiny. Freedom is the capacity to choose wisely and to act well as a matter of habit—or, to use the old-fashioned term, as an outgrowth of virtue . . . That is, freedom is the human capacity that unifies all our other capacities into an orderly whole, and directs our actions toward the pursuit of happiness and goodness understood in the noblest sense: the union of the human person with the absolute good, who is God. (para. 11)

Michael Polanyi (1974), the philosopher of science, put it in these terms: "The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must" (p. 309). Christ expressed it best in the Gospel of John: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). True freedom can be found only in the truth, and Jesus declares Himself to be the truth. Outside of this truth, there is no real safety or freedom (Gantt & Thayne, 2017).

In what sense is Jesus the truth and how does this reality relate to our understanding of human emotions? Commonly, we associate truth with statements or propositions that are descriptive of reality as opposed to associating truth with specific individuals. Yet, the Savior declares Himself to be the truth, which is more than affirming the truth of His own teachings. While the latter is included in this comprehensive view, Christ points to a more personal way in

which He embodies the truth. He taught it, lived it, expressed it, and exemplified it through all that He said, did, thought, and was, as well as through all that He continues to be and do. David O. McKay (2011), a past president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, put it thus:

Members of the Church of Christ are under obligation to make the sinless Son of Man their ideal. He is the one Perfect Being who ever walked the earth; the sublimest example of nobility; Godlike in nature; perfect in his love; our Redeemer; our Savior; the immaculate Son of our Eternal Father; the Light, the Life, the Way. . . . I accept Jesus Christ as the personification of human perfection. (para. 28)

Since no other individual on earth has ever fully aligned himself with truth and truthful living, Jesus is the only one who can be identified with the truth. And those who desire to follow Him are invited to accept Him as the full truth, embrace Him in their full beings, intellectually and affectively, and be fully converted and transformed as a result. Nowhere in scripture does the Savior speak about the benefits of partial or half-hearted Christianity!

Different terms have been used throughout history to label this process of full acceptance, including “surrender,” “consecration,” “self-denial,” “conversion,” etc. The objective is a single focus, or “an eye single” to God through a dedicated life of self-giving, which is true self-actualization. The late Latter-day Saint apostle Neal A. Maxwell (1995) described it as

the submission of one’s will [which] is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God’s altar. The many other things we “give” . . . are actually the things He has already given or loaned to us. However, when you and I finally submit ourselves, by letting our individual wills be swallowed up in God’s will, then we are really giving something to Him! It is the only possession which is truly ours to give! Consecration thus constitutes the only unconditional surrender which is also a total victory! (para. 29)

It does not sound like freedom, it does not sound like palatable truth, and it does not appear to be what we really desire—unless we experience even a little taste of God’s love and power, which then kindles and rekindles our desire for Him. But other inward-facing desires come into conflict with desires for God, and many of the emotional conflicts we experience

originate in this internal turmoil. Like Paul, then, we are led to think that “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15, New Revised Standard Version).

Since emotions as a whole manifest our deepest desires, the sorting out of our desires through surrender to God’s will facilitates emotional peace, at least in those cases where the emotional discomfort originates in internal fragmentation. When the truth of Christ is truly internalized, when His promises, love, and grace reach deeply into the human heart to transform our deepest desires and to expand our perspectives in an eternal direction, a certain degree of emotional peace will ultimately be achieved (Kramer-Holmes, 2017). Conversely, attachment to our own objectives, as determined by the ego and its demands, will cause us to be emotionally “tossed to and fro” (Eph. 4:14, King James Version) in a world that is ever seeking but “never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). When emotions function as signs of our slavery to narrow perspectives, concerns, and desires, we can turn to Christ to find true freedom and peace. This embracing of our light source is rooted in deep faith and continuous transformations that are made possible by the Spirit as we experience the Savior’s love in our lives. This is a decisive truth about the emotions!

CONCLUSION

A Christ-centered approach to the emotions does not suggest that every emotional difficulty is caused by insufficient faith or that emotion regulation is only to be carried out through spiritual means. It does remind us, however, that many of our emotional difficulties are ultimately rooted in a faulty general “orientation” toward life, which may only touch upon or intersect with Christianity rather than being fully infused by it. This radically comprehensive dimension of the Christian faith may be uncomfortable and even intimidating. Yet, it is central to Jesus’s message as when He claimed: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Christian therapists that have an established relationship of safety and trust with their Christian clients could explore the status of this particular spiritual orientation and emphasize its importance

for overall emotional well-being. Where drifting has occurred, as it does for all of us, a gentle reminder can be offered that we can always turn to Christ anew and that every day can be a new beginning for Jesus's friends. This is the first important reality of a Christ-centered perspective: It ultimately requires a singleness of focus, but it is issued as a repeated invitation rather than as an unforgiving demand.

The second important reality is that we cannot demand this spiritual connection. Because communion with Christ is inherently unforced, demanding it or seeking it for reward, whether emotional or not, will preclude having it. True, we need to desire this union and be open to it, but it is finally a gift of God, and as such, we can only respond to it with welcoming gratitude, even as it is accompanied by increased awareness of our own imperfect, faulty selves. Indeed, God gives "unto men weakness that they may be humble," but His "grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before [Him]; for if they humble themselves before [Him], and have faith in [Him], then will [He] make weak things become strong unto them" (Ether 12:27). In this process, when God pours out His love through the Spirit, we can come to participate in the pinnacle of human emotional experience, a sublime connection that pierces the soul and transforms its desires. This love, the truest and most freely given emotion we can think of, can heal all other emotions and set them in their proper order. Indeed, as Paul says, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature," nor any negative emotion "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39). That is when Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" of our emotions.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, L. F., Lewis M., & Haviland-Jones, J. M. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of emotions* (4th ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swindler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (2007). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (2017). Why self-denial? Retrieved from <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/why-self-denial>
- Borgman, B. S. (2009). *Feelings and faith: Cultivating godly emotions in the Christian life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Brooks, D. (2011, September 12). If it feels right . . . *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/13/opinion/if-it-feels-right.html>
- Burtka, J. A. (2017, Nov/Dec.). A peculiar sickness. *Touchstone*, 30(6), 17–19.
- Clayton, W. L. (2016, April). Rooted in Christ. Retrieved from <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2016/08/young-adults/rooted-in-christ?lang=eng>
- Crenshaw, B. R. (2015, August 12). "Shut up bigot!": The intolerance of tolerance. Retrieved from <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/08/15398/>
- Deneen, P. (2018a). *Why liberalism failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Deneen, P. (2018b, April). The ignoble lie. *First Things*, 282, 27–32.
- de Tocqueville, A. (2004). *Democracy in America*. (A. Goldhammer, Trans.). New York, NY: Library of America. (Original work published 1835)
- Dixon, T. (2003). *From passions to emotions: The creation of a secular psychological category*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Esolen, A. (2016, December 1). Love, liberal education, and the secret of human identity. Retrieved from <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2016/12/18331/>
- Gantt, E. E. (2005). Hedonism, suffering and redemption: The challenge of a Christian psychotherapy. In A. Jackson & L. Fischer (Eds.), *Turning Freud upside down: Gospel perspectives on psychotherapy's fundamental problems* (pp. 52–79). Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press.
- Gantt, E. E., & Thayne, J. L. (2017). Humanistic psychology, same-sex attraction, and safe spaces. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, 38(1), 3–21. Retrieved from <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol38/iss1/5>
- George, R. P. (2016, December). Gnostic liberalism. *First Things*, 268, 33–38.
- Gordon, T., & Borushok, J. (2017). *The ACT approach: A comprehensive guide for acceptance & commitment therapy*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media.
- Gregory, B. (2015). *The unintended reformation: How a religious revolution secularized society*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2016). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kramer-Holmes E. (2017, April 4). Waiting upon the Lord: The antidote to uncertainty. In *BYU Speeches*. Retrieved from https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/erin-kramer-holmes_waiting-upon-lord-antidote-uncertainty/
- Longenecker, D. (2014, April 18). The rise of aggressive emotivism. Retrieved from <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/04/rise-aggressive-emotivism.html>
- MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue: A Study in moral theory*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Martin, F., & Wright, W. M. (2015). *The Gospel of John* (Catholic commentary on sacred scripture). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Maxwell, N. A. (1995, October). Swallowed up in the will of the Father. Retrieved from <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1995/10/swallowed-up-in-the-will-of-the-father?lang=eng>
- McKay, D. O. (2011). Jesus Christ: "The Way, The Truth, and The Life." In *Teachings of presidents of the church: David O. McKay*. Retrieved from <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-david-o-mckay/chapter-1?lang=eng>
- Murray, A. (2018). *Saving truth: Finding meaning & clarity in a post-truth world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Papageorgious, C., & Wells, A. (2003). An empirical test of a clinical metacognitive model of rumination and depression. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 27(3), 261–273.
- Payne, C. (2017, Nov/Dec.). Fatal instinct. *Touchstone*, 30(6), 42–46.
- Plamper, J. (2017). *The history of emotions: An introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833 (1992). Retrieved from <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/91-744.ZS.html>
- Polanyi, M. (1974). *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Power, M., & Dalgleish, T. (2016). *Cognition and emotion: From order to disorder*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Pratt, P. P. (1978). *Key to the science of theology: A voice of warning*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book.
- Properzi, M. (2018). *Mormonism and the emotions* (Paperback). Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Properzi, M. (in press). Between Christian morality and divine passibility: Mormon reflections on the passions in nineteenth-century Utah. *Mormon Historical Studies*, 19(2).
- Ravasi, G. (2014, November 25). Towards a biblical theology of emotions. Retrieved from <http://www.cultura.va/content/dam/cultura/docs/pdf/ravasi/TOWARDS%20A%20BIBLICAL%20THEOLOGY%20ON%20EMOTIONS.pdf>
- Reno, R. R. (2016). *Resurrecting the idea of a Christian society*. Washington, DC: Regnery Faith.
- Reno, R. R. (2017, May). Return of the strong gods. *First Things*, 273, 37–42.
- Ridderbos, H. (1997). *The Gospel of John: A theological commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Roberts, R. C. (2007). *Spiritual emotions: A psychology of Christian virtues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Rolheiser, R. (2003, March 23). Affective prayer. Retrieved from <http://ronrolheiser.com/affective-prayer/#.WxHJ2UiUs2w>
- Rolheiser, R. (2015, October 19). Displacing ego and narcissism. Retrieved from <http://ronrolheiser.com/displacing-ego-and-narcissism/#.WxHJy0iUs2w>
- Silf, M. (2007). *Inner compass*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press.
- Simpson, A. (2018, January). All the satisfaction we can't find. *Christianity Today*, 61(10), 62–65.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2009). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C., Christoffersen, K., Davidson, H., & Herzog P. S. (2011). *Lost in transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, J. K. (2014). *How (not) to be secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Stearns, P. (2018, January 8). An emotional America. Retrieved from <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/01/08/an-emotional-america/>
- Stets, J. E., & Turner, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of the sociology of emotions* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Springer.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tetlow, J. A. (2009). *The spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola: With commentary*. New York, NY: Crossroad.
- Tetlow, J. A. (2016). *Always discerning: An Ignatian spirituality for a new millennium*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press.
- Tollefsen, C. O. (2015, July 14). Gender identity. Retrieved from <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/07/15308/>
- Twenge, J. M., Gentile, B., DeWall, C. N., Ma, D. S., Lacefield, K., & Schurtz, D. R. (2010). Birth cohort increases in psychopathology among young Americans, 1938-2007: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the MMPI. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 145–154.

- Vianney, J. (n.d.). On the Holy Spirit, by St. John Vianney. Retrieved from <https://catholicsaints.info/on-the-holy-spirit-by-saint-john-vianney/>
- Weigel, G. (2002, March). A better concept of freedom. *First Things*, 121, 14–20.
- The Wheatley Institution. (2016, July 18). *The age of feeling—Robert P. George* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp3LQcz5sag>
- Wiarda, H. J. (2014). *Political culture, political science and identity politics: An uneasy alliance*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Williams, S. R. (2011, July 27). Toward a theology of emotion. Retrieved from <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/07/27/toward-a-theology-of-emotion/>
- Word of the year 2016 is . . . (2016). In *English Oxford Living Dictionaries* online. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>