

Incarnational Goal-Setting— Identity, Vocation, and Discernment: Building Foundations for Formation

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“Tell me how it stands with your Christology, and I will tell you who you are”¹

People come to study theology for many reasons. The seminary has as its goal the formation of people—or more correctly perhaps, transformation—so they can grow in their experience and understanding of God, to become free, ‘more faithful and fruitful.’² This focus comes to the fore in Field Education, where we work with students as they reflect upon their ministry, what they do, how they do it, why they do it.

I write as a Christian and my experience in prayer of the person of Jesus Christ has foundational and transformational for my faith and life. This paper offers a process for goal-setting to be used by Field Education stu-

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dents that helps them articulate a sense of self-identity grounded in their experience of Jesus. The recognition of this self-identity is at the core of formation work and has potential beyond the academic tasks of goal-setting and evaluation to become a tool for ongoing discernment. I would be interested to hear how the process I outline may be applied in other faith traditions.

THE PROBLEM

Setting goals is a common requirement in today's self-directed learning environments. As a teacher in theological field education one of my roles is to help students set goals. It has been a frustrating process to date. This paper is a reflection on my experience of goal-setting and how it is changing.

What should be the source of these goals? All my students are in ministry situations. Should their goals be derived from the terms of their employment contracts? Should the goals be a list of tasks that need doing—a to-do list or a student's wish list? Or should the goals identify the deficiencies or weaknesses of the student that need to be addressed. Or do the goals end up as a list of what the student thinks that I, as the teacher, want them to do or say? Is it possible that there could be another source, transcendental or incarnational, for goal-setting?

Some students are weary of goal-setting. They have had to do it in work environments over years. Other students have never had to be deliberate about goals and have no idea how to make them 'specific, concrete and measurable.' Most can name or create goals, but I often have the sense they have been constructed to meet academic requirements or the expectations of others in authority. Students are not aware that the goals they set might actually become a tool in their ongoing formation, not just while at the seminary, but in ministry and life.

I spend a lot of time and energy reworking goals with students to help shape them into a form we will be able to assess together at the end of the academic year. Even then, they are likely to end up with a set of tasks they can tick off, hopefully with a new and healthy habit formed, but with little understanding about what has happened to them personally in the process.

So goal-setting has not been one of my favourite tasks. It is labour-intensive and brings little satisfaction. This feeling is reinforced when we arrive at assessment. I realise that little seems to have shifted within the student in terms of coming to understand more of themselves as a person in

ministry. Seldom have I seen signs of the transformation or grounding in an authentic identity that I would hope for them.

I don't just want students to achieve a set of tasks, no matter how commendable these tasks might be. I want them to learn about themselves, especially about their inner dynamics. I want them to learn about the *process*, not just the outcomes they may or may not achieve. I want them to finish the year being able to articulate more of who they are called to be as a person in ministry. I want them to move from being reactive, to being reflective and responsive. I want them to grow in their relationship with Jesus, and to find in this relationship the source from which ministry and life flow.

My original theological formation began in contemplative spirituality as a spiritual director. I learned to set goals for myself that come from prayer. My goals came from and are still grounded in what I believe God is calling me to be. I don't have years to train my students in contemplative practice. I have an hour or two to get them drafting goals that will form part of their academic assessment at the end of the year. I have been frustrated with the process as it exists in our system.

Fortunately, as I was leaving home to lead a recent batch of students into the tortuous world of goal-setting, my husband (also trained in contemplative practice) asked me whether they were going to be setting their goals this year from 'a place of prayer.' I left with the realisation that somehow I had lost this focus. This type of prayer is not just a 'Please-God-show-me-what-my-goals-should-be-this-year.' I knew I was being challenged to do something different.

WHAT HAPPENED

I began the class with the usual introductions to the paperwork and the academic requirements that the students would need to address, including guidelines for goal-setting.³ But after doing all that, I suggested they put the forms aside and take five minutes to pray in silence. I asked them, in prayer, to focus on Jesus and on his humanity. What qualities about him do they like? What attracts them to this man? And quietly, without disturbing their prayer, to make a note of those qualities.

At this point, I had little idea what might happen. I was responding to my own sense of encounter with Jesus, the man, and how this encounter continues to shape me. The process was not strange to me but it was for the students who largely come from either activist or evangelical backgrounds.

This type of reflective prayer has not been strong as well in the Baptist tradition to which I belong.

They sat in silence, I considered my next steps. I had no plan. I remembered one of Anthony De Mello's prayer exercises, *The Thousand Names of God*.⁴ After a time of prayerful contemplation, I suggested to them that the qualities we are drawn to in another person are often qualities that we ourselves possess, perhaps in embryonic form. As they considered this silently, I invited them to see if the qualities they were drawn to in Jesus were qualities that they could use in their goal-setting. They then began writing. After a few minutes I asked them to share. Together we would try to shape these into the required concrete, specific, and measurable goals.

The first student to share revolutionised my goal-setting processes forever. Stephen Field rose to his feet and said, 'I've done many goal-setting processes over the years, and they have always focused on what needed improvement, or my areas of weakness or failures. What you've done is ask me to look at my strengths, and to set goals from there. That is so different and it really feels difficult.'

The class just sat there. I felt that Stephen had just handed me 'a pearl of great value.' My excitement was palpable. I realized that goals need to work with and build on our strengths rather than reinforce our weaknesses and failings. Our strengths are qualities that are embodied in our relationship with Christ. Thomas Merton once observed that when we know who we are called to be, our 'true self,'⁵ then the questions of how we are to be, and what we are to do, can actually be answered. Stephen read a draft of this article and commented:

That moment in the meeting was also a 'breakthrough' moment for me. I had been insecure about my gifting as a Pastoral Carer and I was approaching the year with a fair amount of trepidation. That moment gave me clarity about my purpose and an assurance that God was with me. A life-changing moment for both of us!⁶

Stephen's response is etched in my memory and I keep coming back to this awareness. It flowed for me from guided prayer experiences where I had been invited to imagine Jesus' own experience of baptism and temptation. I found in them a vital link with the humanity of Jesus, a link that allowed me to see his experience in my life, and my experience in his. It also echoed for me de Mello's exercise mentioned above. In this exercise, after a period of creating names for Jesus ('Jesus, my delight... Jesus, my strength... Jesus, my joy...'), we are invited to hear Jesus firstly create names for us,

and then to hear him using the same names for us that we created for him ('Roslyn, my delight...Roslyn, my strength...Roslyn, my joy...'). De Mello gives a good foundation for this in the exercise, which many find challenging. Stephen's response confirmed for me these earlier experiences in a way that linked affirmation with a sense of call, and the development of goals. As I continue to talk and reflect upon this moment, I discover more and more treasures in this experience.

Some might argue that what I asked the students to do that day was merely psychological projection. Or could it be an invitation to recognise the shape of God within? Perhaps they are the same thing. 'According to legend, Joan of Arc was accused by the inquisitors that her visions were just her imagination. Her response was, "Of course it's my imagination, how else could God speak to me?"'⁷ Even if this goal-setting process is 'merely psychological projection,' I know God can use this dynamic to draw us deeper into God's own life and love. This paper is an effort to share with you some of my thinking since then and the process that is developing.

MY THEORY

The words 'identity,' 'vocation,' and 'discernment' are very important to me. Personally, my sense of identity is something that has been forged in the fires of supervision and spiritual direction, reflecting in depth about where and how God works in me and in my experiences. My sense of my vocation or calling flows directly for me from my self-identity. Therefore, a sense of self-identity is key for me in the practice of discernment. It is for me a 'tap-root' of my being that is grounded in God.

Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and others, have written about the need to live and minister from our 'true self,' the person God created us to be, not the person we think we need to be.⁸ "For me," Merton wrote, "to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."⁹ Merton continues:

Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours...

Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.¹⁰

This true self, my identity, is God's image uniquely imprinted in me. It is not a secret hidden from me by God. My identity is something I can discover in the pattern of my life, a particular set of characteristics embedded in me, qualities that shine through whatever roles or tasks I may undertake. My identity is who I am. My identity is also *how* I am, how I live my life. We each have within us a unique expression of life, of potential, and this unique expression is not just for the purposes of our own self-realisation.

We are the body of Christ, together as a community—and who we each are individually, uniquely, is a particular aspect of the image of Christ that we carry. It is useful to consider, What is the unique aspect of Christ each of us brings to the whole body? I am most myself when I find this core within and live from this place of my true self, my identity in Christ. To put it another way, we are each a particular, unique expression of the Divine life—a God's gift of love and life to the world—that only we can offer. How can I uncover and bring to greater life this gift that I carry? Jesus knew himself. His identity is expressed for us in his manifesto:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Lk 4:18-19).

He actually didn't finish the quotation from Isaiah. He cut short the reading. He left out the proclamation of 'the day of the vengeance of our God,' an omission that would have stung the hearers who lived under Roman oppression.¹¹ In doing that he makes a statement as much about who he was not as who he was. He articulates who he was and how he was called to be in the world. He lived out this identity by the way he was with people and what he did.

We know from the rest of the story in the Gospel of Luke that it is a risky business to live as authentically as Christ did. We are not called to be clones of Christ. Carl Jung writes, "It is no easy matter to live a life that is modelled on Christ's, but it is unspeakably harder to live one's own life as truly as Christ lived his."¹² To live from the place of our true identity is a risky business because it will be confronting to others. It takes courage to continue in the face of opposition.

Our individual identity, our true self, cannot be discovered through doing a psychological profile or gifts inventory, as helpful as these can be towards in self-awareness. I believe our true self is something that needs to be discerned through reflection upon the patterns of our life and experi-

ence. We usually need a process to help bring this to the surface whereby a spiritual director or skilled supervisor helps us engage with it. Herbert Alphonso writes about how the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius can be used to discover this true self. Alphonso called it the 'Personal Vocation.'¹³ Agnes Sanford writing twenty years earlier called it the 'Name of Grace.'¹⁴ My aim is to help people, particularly our ministry trainees, learn ways in which they can begin to discover their unique identity. I want to help them articulate this identity, and then to be able to use it intentionally in reflecting upon their ministry, and discerning how best to live out their identity as part of the body of Christ.

We are who we are because of our relationships. Relationships form us and inform us. So our relationship with God through Christ must be the reference point for discovering our true self, the person we were created by God to be. This relationship can only be fostered through prayer. There is a particular prayer practice that I believe can assist in discovering and affirming personal identity. It is a practice known as the *Awareness Examen*. This practice has been beautifully simplified for contemporary Christians by Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn in the book *Sleeping With Bread*.¹⁵ Using a daily time of contemplative prayer they invite us to reflect upon two questions that will help us become more aware of the pattern of God's work in our lives, and through this to discover more of our inner calling, our true self. The Linns suggests a variety of ways to ask these two questions:¹⁶

For what moment today am I most grateful?

For what moment today am I least grateful?

When did I give and receive the most love today?

When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today?

When did I most feel life draining out of me?

When did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe?

When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today?

When was I saddest?

What was today's high point?

What was today's low point?

What I am proposing combines this type of reflective prayer with goal-setting, starting from a Christological basis. I suggest that you undertake this following process as a process of prayer and reflection that explores this in

your own life and experience. We cannot send our students onto journeys that we ourselves have not undertaken. This is the process that I invite you to undertake:

THE PROCESS

1. Before you begin this prayer, you will need 2 pieces of paper. Divide your first page into three columns.

Allow yourselves to slow down, become more present to this time and place, consciously open to God's presence and activity in your own life. Quiet contemplation on the biblical texts will help you focus as you progress through the activities. These texts are offered as stepping-stones. Whether their perspective is familiar or not, let them lead you into this space of prayer with its gifts for you at this time.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift (Eph 4:1-7).

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).

2. You are invited to reflect quietly on this question: 'What is the "new self" that we are asked to clothe ourselves in?'

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14).

3. Become still and centre yourself. In your imagination, look at Jesus the man, at his life, and note the qualities that draw you to him. Don't try and think your way into this. Simply let your experience arise from within and trust what happens in this place of prayer. Focus on Jesus, on the human qualities as you would of a good friend (not those qualities that we would ascribe to his divinity)...Write these qualities in the first column of your page.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...' (Gen 1:26).

4. Reflect now upon your life story. In the second column note where and how you have experienced these qualities you admire in Jesus within your life.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).

5. Reflect on these two lists and how you have experienced within your life the qualities that you admire in Jesus. Which one of these qualities has the strongest appeal for you? Which of them holds the most energy for you? Which offers you a sense of lightness, joy, freedom, etc? Which draws you forward NOW into a greater sense of the fullness of God's life? Mark this on your sheet.
6. On your second page, complete this sentence using the quality in Jesus that you have identified: 'Jesus is a man who...'

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

7. Complete this sentence using the same quality in the same words; 'I am a wo/man who...' (also on your second page).
8. Sit with these two statements for a few minutes. Let yourself feel their impact. What do you notice within yourself as you sit with them? Make note on this second page of the internal responses, feelings, or inner dialogue that comes—this is data that may indicate inner resistance or affirmation of this identity to explore later with your spiritual director.

The basis for this activity is that the qualities that attract you to others are quite particular. You are a unique individual, and the way you express and experience any of your friendships is a unique experience between you and your friend. The qualities that you identify in Jesus are, I suggest, particular qualities that He draws out in you. These may be qualities that you easily recognise and identify, or they may be still embryonic, calling for growth and expression in you. They are not theoretical, but a real expression of the fullness of life that Jesus now invites you to live into. You may also become aware not only how these qualities have been experienced but how they have been repressed in your experience.

When leading groups in this process I next invite them to read aloud the two statements, about Jesus and about themselves. It is important that they do this without qualification, comment or response, just reading what has been written, and let the others receive and honour it in silence before the next person reads their two statements.

We then discuss what it is like for them to read these to the group, and to hear other people read their statements. The general response has been that it is difficult to read their own statements, but that it is wonderful to hear the statements of others and recognise the truth of the statement.¹⁷ The value in the vocalisation of the statements seems to be this: to hear others' statements and see the truth of these, then the individual maybe able to accept there is some truth in what they personally have named, even in the face of inner resistance.

I continue the exercise after this discussion.

9. How would you like to work within your current situation with the quality held in this identity statement? What would you like to do to further develop this within your life? Make notes of this in the third column of your first page.
10. Choose two of these possibilities that you would like to have as goals for this academic year—one personal and one ministry related. Using the format of *The Examen Questions* (outlined above in my discussion) to shape these qualities into two questions for your ongoing self-reflection and prayer.¹⁸
11. Craft goals that will help you to intentionally explore these qualities this year. State the goal in concrete, specific and measurable terms. Include in the goal the processes of self-reflection. At this point the challenge is to translate a theoretical quality into a specific and measurable goal that can be evaluated at the end of the year.

A suggested format for the goals is as follows:

- First, state the quality that you wish to develop (your identity statement);
- Next, write the background to the goal, including why this goal is important to you at this time;
- Finally, list the steps you will take to achieve this goal.

A POSSIBLE TEMPLATE

IDENTITY STATEMENT:...

BACKGROUND:...

PROCESS: *I will...by...*

To do this, I will reflect upon the qualities identified in the prayer reflection (List these...)

in (my life/ministry/relationships...),

in these ways (journaling/prayer discussion/verbatim presentations...),

at these times (daily/weekly/monthly...),

using these two questions: (my personal Examen Questions...),

and record what I notice.

I will explore these reflections with (supervisor/spiritual director/mentor...) identifying what helps and what hinders the growth of these qualities in me, and present a summary of this to my peer group and supervisor in my final evaluation.

EXAMPLE

IDENTITY STATEMENT: *'I am a woman of courage, courage in the face of fear and uncertainty, courage to dare to live my own life fully.'*

BACKGROUND: *At this time in my life I feel myself being invited to explore new territory through pursuing higher study. I also feel the pressures of work responsibilities, family concerns, and community involvements. I am challenged by this identity statement to stay focussed upon the call I feel in the face of external challenges and opposition, and internal fear and uncertainty.*

PROCESS: *I will reflect upon 'I am a woman of courage, courage in the in the face of fear and uncertainty, courage to dare to live my own life fully,' through daily personal journaling, using these two questions: When did I feel the fullness of life today? When did I least feel the fullness of life? (my personal Examen Questions) I record what I notice.*

I will use my monthly verbatim presentations with my supervisor to explore instances when I notice that I have held back from living out 'the fullness of life' in my work or studies.

I will explore these reflections, and what I have recorded, with my spiritual director, identifying what helps and what hinders the growth of this quality in me, and present a summary of this to my peer group and supervisor in my final evaluation.

At the end of the year, this goal can be assessed:

- Did the student take the time to reflect, to record her reflections, to present and discuss as outlined?
- Did her final evaluation include statements of what has helped and hindered the growth of this quality in her?
- What new insights has she gained through undertaking this process?

I believe it is important to explicitly include the processes of self-reflection in the goal. Students are encouraged to learn about *how* they learn. “Reflection...encourages metacognition that supports learning. Learners who achieve well are more often those who are aware of, and able to reflect on, their own learning processes, their weaknesses and strengths.”¹⁹

The final outcome of this process is a set of goals that do not come out of an individual’s deficiency or neediness—but out of giftedness and strengths, and a clearer sense of identity—and these goals call me to live out the particular aspect of the divine life that I carry within me. What I have done in this exercise thus far has focussed upon helping students articulate one Christ-like quality that they carry. The reality is that we each carry multiple qualities in varying degrees, and it is the particular combination of these in us that makes each the unique individual we are. By spending time reflecting in depth on the various qualities that we carry, we can discover greater depth and stronger foundations for who we are and how we are to be in the world. This is the foundation that we need to survive the demands of ministry—an identity grounded in Christ.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This exercise in discovering self-identity is like an iceberg. There is far more below the surface than we are aware of at first. What we touch upon here is like seeing an iceberg at a distance. We can see some of the peaks, but we know a different angle will show other aspects—and, of course, the majority of the iceberg is underwater, out of view, and only discovered with patient exploration. For me, when I have a sense of this mystery of self-identity, I want to know more. I want to track it down, explore it more fully, coming to know its gifts and its vulnerabilities for me. I will never be able to uncover it in its fullness in this lifetime. But I want to bring what I do discover into the fullness of Christ’s body, the church, through all I do and am.

I want to help my students grow in their life of faith and their relationship with God. I want them to know that who they are is a unique expres-

sion of God's image. I want them to see how they are called to live out this image in the world. I want them to be all they can be, in God's love. This method of goal-setting will help them walk into that journey.

The process here is a tool that some people have found helpful. I am excited by the possibilities that this process offers and I want to explore how it might be further integrated into the supervision process of ministry students. This process for goal-setting

- starts from the prayer experience of the individual, focussed upon their particular relationship with Jesus.
- It calls the students to recognise the particular qualities in Jesus that might hold for them the clues to the fullness of life to which God calls them, their particular identity or expression of God's life in them and for the world.
- It introduces them to a pattern of *Examen* that is key to the practice of discernment in everyday life.
- It incorporates steps that will provide a means of evaluating their progress at the end of the academic year
- It offers a process for depth learning that is at the heart of action-reflection models of adult education.

I look forward to continuing my exploration of this process with students and supervisors. I welcome your feedback about this tool and how you might use it in your work.

NOTES

1. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 66.
2. Stephen Ames, "Theological Reflection—What Is at Stake?," in *Together in Ministry: Essays to Honour John Paver*, Heather Cameron, Colin Hunter, Michael Kelly, and Randall Prior, eds. (Melbourne, Australia: Uniting Academic Press, 2009), 99–112.
3. I received a very helpful guideline as a class handout in 1994, Spiritual Leaders Program, Heart of Life Spirituality Centre, Melbourne, Australia. A similar guideline can be found online: Section 4, "Guidelines for Goal-Setting," in RHA President Handbook PDF (National Association of College and University Residence Halls, Inc., 2009), 6–7 [cited June 17, 2009], available online at <http://www.nacurh.org/docs/RHA%20President%20Handbook.pdf> (Last accessed February 27, 2012).
4. Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God*, 14th ed. (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1983), 111–113. In this exercise the participant is invited to invent names for Jesus that express one's love for him. The exercise concludes with allowing Jesus to use the same names of love back to the one praying.
5. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire, UK: Anthony Clarke, 1961), 28.
6. Personal email correspondence, Reflection on your article, July 13, 2011.

7. Matthew Linn, Dennis Linn, and Sheila Fabricant, *Praying with Another for Healing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 30.
8. See Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, chapter 5; Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
9. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 25.
10. Ibid.
11. Compare Luke 4:18-19 with Isaiah 61:1-2.
12. Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, W.S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes, trans. (New York: A Harvest Book, 1933), 273.
13. Herbert Alphonso, SJ, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001).
14. Agnes Sanford, *Sealed Orders* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972).
15. Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995).
16. Linn, Linn, and Linn, *Sleeping with Bread*, 6-7.
17. There is some interesting work to be done here about the resistances felt at this point. The universal 'cringe' is totally at odds with the invitation to be renewed in the image of God (Rom 13:14, Gal 3:27, Eph 4:23-24, Col 3:10). And yet the response is justified by people because they think/feel they are 'unworthy.'
18. The Examen Questions are reshaped using the qualities identified in Jesus and self, see Linn, Linn, and Linn, *Sleeping with Bread*. Also, Examen Questions are alternately known as Awareness Examen or Consciousness Examen, see Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning Through the Spiritual Exercises*; George Aschenbrenner, SJ, "Becoming Whom We Contemplate," *The Way Supplement* 52, (1985); and "Consciousness Examen: Becoming God's Heart for the World," *Review for Religious* 47, no. 6 (1988); Brian Gallagher, *Pray—As You Are*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne, Australia: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 1999).
19. Jennifer A. Moon, *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 86.