

Article

I Am What I Do—Negative Work as a Lens for the Study of Movement Chaplaincy

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Abstract: This article explores the application of the concept of negative work within Movement Chaplaincy, contending that this framework facilitates engagement with negative spirituality in this sphere of ministry. Using the lens of the ‘work of the negative’, it examines the interplay between spirituality and political activism in Movement Chaplaincy, addressing potential resistance and inquiries surrounding the fusion of ‘negative spirituality’—focused on the apophatic and mystical-paradoxical aspects—and practical collective activism. This approach emphasizes the practical and theoretical aspects of challenging prevailing narratives, investigating self-subverting methods, and unearthing layers of non-identical elements within this process. It suggests that the evolving interest in the role of spirituality within social movements, coupled with initiatives like the Daring Compassion project, signifies a synergy between academic exploration and practical spiritual care provision. Ultimately, this article seeks to interpret activist work through the lens of spiritual accompaniment, creating space for an expanded understanding of activism across diverse identities and power dynamics. It proposes that the concept of ‘negative work’ serves as a tool for interpreting and deepening comprehension of the intrinsic dynamics within Movement Chaplaincy, fostering an inclusive and transformative approach to social and political change.

Keywords: negative work; chaplaincy; political theology; apophatic theology; spirituality



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1. How Does Negative Spirituality Contribute to the Work of Activists?

“While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free” (Eugene Victor 2001; cf. also Sölle 2006, p. 341). Eugen Debs

This article uses the concept of the ‘work of the negative’ as a lens to analyze the connection between spirituality and political activism in Movement Chaplaincy. This approach may raise some initial resistance or concerns. Is ‘negative spirituality’, i.e., a spirituality that focuses on the apophatic (what we cannot know or say about the divine) and mystical paradox (how the divine crosses and exceeds our expectations and understanding), not necessarily an individual and introspective venture? How could it possibly connect to the practical and collective task of activism? Are religious institutions not inherently loyal to the status quo, with a conservative attitude toward any political change? Does ‘activism’ not risk becoming a partisan enterprise or even ‘sectarian’ if it commits openly to any spiritual practice? To avoid any confusion, I want to be clear about the scope and aim of this article: it does not aim to make a theological argument on why negative spirituality and political activism need each other, nor is it a sociological case study on the benefits that a contemplative or apophatic praxis provides in the context of activism. It comes rather from a philosophical–theological interest in the question of how negative spirituality resonates with and can be activated in political activism. While the research question comes from a Christian, more specifically an Anglo-Catholic context, it aims to reflect critically on its premises and explore where potential openings toward a wider understanding of negative spirituality and political activism could be found.

This essay demonstrates how the connection between beliefs and praxis in both political activism and spirituality can be analyzed by emphasizing their ‘negative’ dynamics. For this purpose, it will apply the lens of ‘negative work’ for a deepened understanding of these dynamics. Work of the negative is a practical and theoretical process of challenging predominant narratives, allowing for analyzing self-subverting techniques and discovering layers of the non-identical within this process (Cf. [Finlayson 2012](#), p. 17). It proposes focusing on critical, non-discursive modes of thinking (e.g., in faith, visionary experience, poetry, aesthetic intuition, etc.). In this sense, it articulates the process of individual emancipation, social transformation, and healing through the lens of the non-identical. The ‘work of the negative’ (*travail du négatif*, *Arbeit des Negativen*)¹ is an expression first used by the German Idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to describe the process of dialectic separation and synthesis. It was reintroduced into the philosophical–psychoanalytical discourse by Jacques Lacan and André Green (Cf. [Küchenhoff and Angehrn 2014](#)). More recent philosophical approaches have adopted the term and focus more strongly on elements of diligent phenomenological work on ‘negative’ concepts in practical and theoretical fields (Cf. [Küchenhoff and Angehrn 2014](#)).

This essay will apply negative work as a lens to the example of Movement Chaplaincy, i.e., the spiritual accompaniment of social movements, to exemplify how this focus on the negative may help to deepen our understanding of praxis and theological reflection. Movement Chaplaincy (MC) is a term that has been coined over the past two decades and formalized in the context of a training program provided by the Faith Matters Network, which established a project called Daring Compassion (<https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/daringcompassion>, accessed on 4 August 2022) that aims to train, equip, and connect Movement Chaplains. According to the Faith Matters website, MC is the “work of spiritual accompaniment to social justice movements and their leaders” (<https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/daringcompassion>, accessed on 21 July 2022). It “participate(s) in social change ecosystems by providing accompaniment, care and resilience building with the goal of reducing activist burnout and creating more sustainable movements at all levels”. While this description distinguishes MC from first-tier/on-the-ground activism, it raises the question of whether or not this type of accompaniment could be adapted within any social movement or whether MC has an intrinsic commitment to “participating in liberatory struggles” (<https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/daringcompassion>, accessed on 21 July 2022) (cf. can there be chaplaincy supporting oppressive groups?). Framing this question more abstractly, what is the link between structures of spiritual engagement and their political framework? I first learned about Movement Chaplaincy when searching for resources and guidelines for ordained ministers who wanted to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2020. When I came across the Movement Chaplaincy training program, I was intrigued by the multi-layered yet very practical training approach that DC offers. I took the training in 2020/21 and was fascinated by how well it resonated with my academic research on negative hermeneutics and the importance of allowing for ‘empty spaces’ within liturgical rituals, but also within pastoral care and ministry. While my previous research had focused on negative hermeneutics as a tool to explore ‘gaps’ (e.g., intended silences, ambivalent omissions, or ‘mishaps’) within liturgy as a potential source for theological study, this project explored how such spaces can be actively inhabited and be an integral part of community building. A research fellowship funded by the German Academic Exchange Service allowed me to explore this connection in more depth and study how the lens of ‘negative work’ can enhance our understanding of the role of Movement Chaplaincy and its connection to negative spiritual practices.

While religion and spiritual expression have often been part of social movements (through individual motivation, organizational structure, language, etc.), their contribution to social and political change has attracted systematic academic interest only in the past few decades (Cf. [Smith 1996](#), p. 1). Since then, the liberating potential of spirituality and institutionalized religion has been studied from theological (Cf. [Newheiser 2020b](#)) as well as sociological (Cf. [Smith 1996](#)) perspectives. At the same time, the Faith Matters Network

started to offer resources and training opportunities for people who are providing spiritual accompaniment to social justice movements. I suggest that these are two complementary developments: an academic analysis of the potential of spirituality for social activism, and the attempt to frame the work of spiritual care providers in generalized terms while developing tools around practical needs and experiences.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the self-understanding of Movement Chaplaincy as a calling. The Daring Compassion project states, “the role of a Movement Chaplain is to focus on the wholistic [sic] needs of those involved in social change. Chaplaincy is not primarily an intellectual endeavor. It is an imperfect relationship between training and anointing (calling)” ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+(1).pdf), accessed on 23 June 2022). The connection between (teachable) theory and (vocational) praxis makes a generative starting point for a scholarly analysis of their mutual interaction and, at the same time, challenges us to reflect on the potential and the limitations of such an analysis. As the research question comes out of an academic context, it carries the dangers of reducing the complexity and diversity of ‘praxis’ to a simplified and abstract ‘theory’ and discourse. As Mie Inouye states: “For scholars of religion to fully comprehend and further the work of personal and social transformation necessary in the present interregnum, we, too, must look beyond discourse to practice, and beyond prophecy to missionary work” (Inouye 2022). I suggest that MC is an excellent paradigm for articulating the challenges and potential of this work, as it does not only aim to connect contemplative praxis and political action (for example, in Richard Rohr’s Living School), but also to take experiences and impulses from activist praxis and frame them to provide practical resources. This raises the question of what hermeneutical model we can use to study MC as an ongoing and developing praxis.

Any theoretical approach that aims to accommodate for this complexity will need to connect MC’s diversity and practical focus without falling into epistemological relativism. It will need to be open to a variety of non-logocentric types of knowledge (e.g., creative expression in art, non-hegemonic teaching styles, ritual embodiment, etc.) and, at the same time, it would need to be fundamentally anchored in a paradigm of solidarity and liberation. This article suggests that a focus on negative spiritual dynamics helps to articulate an intrinsic link to liberative practices without limiting the work of Movement Chaplaincy to any particular activist project. It explores the potential of negative spirituality as a complementary dynamic to a new and emergent political paradigm of grassroots movements and activism that are characterized by their decentralized structures and critiques of formal channels of political representation (Cf. Newman 2020).

On this basis, this article can be understood as a venture into methodological hybridity. While this project is clearly situated in an academic context and motivated partially by academic rigor, it aims to build a bridge to ongoing activist work, make the scholarly community aware of recent developments, connect academic discourse with experiences from the activist praxis, and, at the same time, build a starting point for activists to reflect on their own experiences and their underlying spirituality/theology (Cf. Abraham 2020). Pointing beyond immanent power dynamics, MC allows us to explore a spirituality that is “open to | interruption, the inbreaking reality of that which is not simply more of the same but a new reality” (Salvatierra 2014, 31s). I suggest that the concept of ‘negative work’ is a suitable tool for interpreting and deepening our understanding of this dynamic. This article proposes that the interpretation of activist work through the lens of spiritual accompaniment is, to a large extent, a process of ‘creating space’ to inspire a renewed and enlarged understanding of activist work across racial, ethnic, and religious differences, and even across differences in societal power, as well as a reinterpretation and ‘revaluing’ of the individual and collective suffering encountered in the movement (Cf. Salvatierra 2014, pp. 37–41). For this purpose, it will explore how the concept of negative work resonates with Movement Chaplaincy as presented by the Daring Compassion Movement Chaplaincy Project.

2. What Is Movement Chaplaincy

“In doing Movement Chaplaincy we are engaging in the work of shifting on how the tools of spirituality are used”. Rev. Margret Ernst

On its website, Daring Compassion describes its purpose as advancing “care, accompaniment and resilience building in social change movements through a focus on the emergent role of Movement Chaplain” (<https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/daringcompassion>; accessed on 25 July 2022). Daring Compassion works in the tradition of spiritual care and accompaniment provided by individuals within activist movements. It was developed from the increasing awareness of the emotional and spiritual toll that activist work takes on individuals and communities and the need for “trained and accountable spiritual and emotional care practitioners” (<https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/daringcompassion>; accessed on 25 July 2022). As an educational enterprise, the project oscillates between descriptive–practical and prescriptive–theoretical elements. It responds to the practical need for training and accountability for people who provide accompaniment within movements and establishes guidelines that can serve as reference points for the work that Movement Chaplaincy provides. I suggest that, in this sense, Movement Chaplaincy, as outlined by the Daring Compassion project, is a hermeneutical venture, engaging with the interpretative value of given settings.

Using the title ‘Chaplain’, the project draws on a long tradition of representatives of a religious tradition attached to a secular institution.² Chaplaincy Studies are a growing field within pastoral and social studies, particularly in the Anglo-American context. They involve the academic exploration and practical training related to providing spiritual and pastoral care in various institutional settings (Cf. Nolan 2021). This field focuses on equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and understanding needed to offer religious, emotional, and spiritual support to individuals and communities in diverse environments. While, in the UK, the focus tends to lay more strongly on questions of the acceptability of religion in a ‘public’ context (Cf. Stephen 2015), the discussion in the United States has often been driven by the perceived needs of spiritual care outside of traditional settings. Many recent studies explore the reach and nature of Chaplaincy work in a wider and diverse way. “Chaplaincy and spiritual care in the twenty-first century”, for example, describes Chaplaincy as a process of meaning making through practices, reflection, and rituals (Cf. Grefe and McCarroll 2022; Grefe et al. 2022; Robins and Tumminio Hansen 2022). Movement Chaplaincy picks up on a similar need but without necessarily drawing from traditional (institutional) considerations of the role and task of a Chaplain.

The Daring Compassion website explains that “The chaplaincy model fits movement culture because instead of people entering a building set aside for religious practice, a chaplain meets people where they are in order to explore, create, and nurture spirituality” ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+(1).pdf), accessed on 5 August 2022). According to Maia Duerr, “a Chaplain can be defined as a representative of a religious tradition, usually ordained, who serves in a secular institution (such as a hospital, prison, police department, university, military unit, etc.) and provides spiritual and pastoral care in that setting” (Duerr 2012). In the context of Daring Compassion, this role is widened to anyone who provides spiritual accompaniment regardless of their religious affiliation. In her thesis “The Protest Chaplains: A new paradigm in chaplaincy during a time of social transformation”, Duerr talks about her experiences as a Chaplain during the Occupy Wallstreet Movement in 2011. She explains: “While the phrase “Protest Chaplain” was used for the first time during the Occupy movement, the idea itself has an impressive lineage. The role of religion in social change has a long history, including the movements to abolish slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s”.³ In the past decade, people who provide spiritual support to movements have begun to build groups and organizations and mutual support and accountability structures (e.g., The Nashville Movement Chaplain Collective (NMCC)).⁴ The term Movement Chaplain draws from the same tradition but is comparatively broader as it emphasizes that spiritual accompaniment

is not only needed in the immediate context of protest but also for the wider ongoing work of social movements.

As a result, the Faith Matters Network uses a practical and dynamic approach for their curriculum “to create co-learning communities where facilitators and participants learn from each other” ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+(1).pdf), accessed on 23 June 2022). In this sense, it differs significantly from traditional Chaplaincy training courses such as accredited Clinical Pastoral Education that are based on a “rigorous accreditation and certification process”.⁵ Accessibility is one of the core aspects of this flexible and open approach to training. The course is intended to equip people who are already working with activist movements, or those who are interested in this type of work, and who are often themselves members of marginalized and oppressed groups. One of the challenges of DC is to provide quality training and set professional and ethical standards for MC work while keeping the course as accessible as possible for people from a variety of backgrounds. Partial or full scholarships, as well as peer and teacher support, a wide range of resources and topics used within the curriculum, and a flexible timeline for the completion of each module help to achieve this goal. Practical reflections on one’s own background, experiences of privilege and oppression, and the “tradition” and community that inspire each individual vocation to MC are part of the course, as well as the written reflections on more theoretical questions and practical sessions on safety and first aid during protests, as well as creative exercises to round out the learning experience. Although the course was developed with a Northern American setting in mind, it is flexible enough to potentially adapt and employ many of its underlying principles (such as racial justice or trauma-sensitive care) in other contexts.

In order to live up to the wholistic and inclusive understanding of their role, Movement Chaplains “use social-emotional tools, spiritual practices, sacred texts, and physical comfort to include healing and care as a part of creating a more just world” (Ernst and Krink 2017). The practical application of these tools varies and depends on an individual’s gifts and training as well as the need of their community and the present situation. It reaches from active listening to providing rituals and engaging in multi-faith work ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+(1).pdf), accessed on 23 June 2022). In addition to practical support, one of the core tasks is offering a ‘ministry of presence’, which the founding members of DC Krink and Ernst describe as “participating in and being a witness to what is happening and providing moral and spiritual support” ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+(1).pdf), accessed on 23 June 2022), using a certain authority and credibility that religious authority hold to de-escalate and calm difficult situation and threats of violence. MC shares these goals and approaches with “prophetic pastoral care”, i.e., a practice that “spiritually serve to heal and empower survivors in the aftermath of trauma and ongoing oppression”.⁶ Prophetic pastoral care aims to empower individuals and communities and bring attention to the social conditions that cause or allow traumatic events and oppression to occur, intending to disrupt and transform a larger vision of peace and justice. The concept of prophetic pastoral care was developed in a more traditional (Christian) setting and often uses a more traditional theological language around processes of reconciliation and healing and distinct roles (i.e., care-giver vs. care-taker). It agrees with MC that “a systemic analysis of structural power” (Walsh 2018, p. 48) is essential for spiritual accompaniment. In the handbook *Introduction to Injustice and the Care of Souls*, Karen Montagno states: “Pastoral care for oppressed populations requires taking the impact of oppression seriously. It is a call to solidarity and the work of justice. Context and community are interrelated and inform the perspectives of both caregiver and receiver” (Montagno 2009, p. 12). Oppression-sensitive pastoral care moves away from the idea of “hyper-individualistic” caregiving and “transforms the oppressed from being objects into being subjects of their history; from

being nobodies into being somebodies” (Chinula 2009, p. 136). It taps into reservoirs of both divine transcendence and divine immanence in its claim to the fullness of life. MC agrees with oppression-sensitive pastoral care that any spiritual and pastoral care needs to be grounded in a structural power analysis and critique. This leads to an intersectional and contextual understanding of healing and justice. In this sense, oppression-sensitive pastoral care moves beyond seeing pastoral care exclusively as an individual-to-individual, pastor-and-client relationship, to seeing it as integral to the vocation and mission of the whole people of God (Cf. Kujawa-Holbrook 2009, p. 16).

To accommodate for the variety of contexts and applications, the Daring Compassion website provides a range of resources on MC, from practical toolkits to statements on interfaith work and podcasts. As particularly insightful examples of the history and the broad range of MC, I would like to mention three of them: 1. the *Guide for Movement Chaplains*, which was “created in preparation for a Movement Chaplaincy team from Nashville that provided care for counter-protesters and community members during the “White Lives Matter” protest in Shelbyville, Tennessee on 28 October 2017” (Ernst and Krink 2017). 2. *The Protest Chaplains Handbook* developed by Abigail Clauhs is intended to integrate critical social justice theory with spiritual care in a way that can be used “on the streets”. While it is “Grounded in Unitarian Universalism, this handbook provides pluralistic resources which can be used in interfaith settings and customized for use by those of other religious traditions”.⁷ 3. Another recent reflection on Chaplaincy in the context of grassroots movements was developed by Aaron Scott, Sarah Monroe, and Lindsey Krinks. It reflects on a tour of the Pacific Northwest that the three took, meeting with different communities of poor people in struggle throughout that region. It originally appeared on Aaron’s blog and was later republished. They describe “Five key responsibilities “emerged over the course of [their] time together” (Scott 2009). The basic principles that they develop—(1) pastoral care for the front lines of struggle; (2) building the theological, spiritual, and moral framework of our struggle for human dignity; (3) equipping and supporting grassroots leaders to love and protect one another; (4) nurturing our people to keep their eyes on the horizon; (5) building power and taking power—resonate well with the work of MC.

These examples show that Daring Compassion is not a stand-alone project, but that there is an increasing interest in and sense for the need to which they are responding. I argue that, through the concept of the work of the negative, this model of apophatic spirituality can be used to deepen the understanding of experiences and patterns within political activism (Cf. Duerr 2012, pp. 26–30) and, by exploring their spiritual dimension, can strengthen as well as critically reflect on activist engagement. As Movement Chaplaincy operates independently from overarching religious structures, it cannot rely on drawing from traditional religious assets for activism, such as a shared religious identity and organizational resources (Cf. Smith 1996, pp. 9–21). While MC is open to drawing from these resources where appropriate (e.g., using religious symbolism) to support and legitimize practical action, it is distinguished from ‘faith-rooted activism’ (Cf. Salvatierra 2014). However, the Daring Compassion training encourages Movement Chaplains to reflect in depth on how their faith motivates their engagement and how their spiritual background enables or hinders their work. At the same time, they are encouraged to approach their task with the greatest possible openness and presence. I would argue that the role of a Movement Chaplain in this sense can be understood as interpretative or hermeneutical: they do not add additional content to the reality of activism but offer an additional layer of interpretation or understanding. As interpretative work, it has the potential to connect movements to a ‘bigger picture’; to remind them of their original motivation, focus on the power of community, or help them move past experiences of doubt and disappointment. This ability to (re-)interpret existing experiences of a movement and to articulate hopes and dreams, but also questions and uncertainties beyond its existing reality, is one of the strengths of the work of MC.⁸

One of the core insights and challenges that this work contributes to the wider theological discourse is the strong autobiographical and self-reflective perspective with which it approaches ministry and liberation. “Telling my story is not itself theology but a basis for theology”, writes Jung Young Lee, stating that it is “indeed the primary context for doing my theology. This is why one cannot do theology for another. If theology is contextual, it must certainly be at root autobiographical” (Lee 1995, p. 7). I suggest that this makes an ideal starting point for applying the concept of ‘negative work’ as a hermeneutical lens to the study of MC. This raises questions about the scope and reach of MC. Can it accompany any type of movement or does it in itself carry a certain political and spiritual approach? Is it intrinsically connected to practices of non-violence? How does it connect to movements that are either confronted with external violence or even see violence as a justified means to achieve a greater good? To what extent are MC Chaplains required to guarantee a connection with the ideals of a movement (orthodoxy) or agreed practices (orthopraxis)? Or are they the spiritual reference point for anyone who joins the movement at any point in time?

I suggest that a ‘negative’ lens can provide a suitable framework for exploring the reach of MC practices as it allows for practical critique as well as for flexible and adaptable spiritual reference points.

3. Negative Work

“There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us” (West and King 2015, p. 63). Martin Luther King

This project suggests that a ‘work of the negative’ can build a suitable lens for studying Movement Chaplaincy as an open-ended exploration of shared spaces. The work of the negative as a connection point for spiritual ‘tools’ within political activism allows us to explore what a negative spiritual approach can contribute to the project of liberation.

In 2014, a collaborative work titled *The Work of the Negative: Exploring Negativity as a Philosophical-Pschoanalytical Issue*, edited by philosopher Emil Angehrn and psychiatrist Joachim Küchenhoff, was published. This interdisciplinary study brought together experts from diverse fields like philosophy, theology, and medicine to delve into the concept of negativity from multiple perspectives. The studies within this work explore both the theoretical and practical aspects of negative work, highlighting its inherent ambiguity. They examine negativity as a theoretical concept—centered on negation, defining what ‘not’ is—and as a lived experience involving loss, suffering, and the limits of existence, defining what ‘should not be’. Collectively, these varied approaches shed light on the fundamental role of negativity in human understanding and lived experiences. For example, the German philosopher Burkhard Liebsch has emphasized the potential of the concept to describe a rhythmical ‘engagement’ with the negative. Rather than emphasizing either an absolute position or negation, negative hermeneutical work leaves space for the finitude of the negative object and the consistent practice of a limited subject (e.g., as a continuous engagement with an ‘other’). This perspective emphasizes the importance of the particular and specific experience and argues that we cannot shortcut the work without losing sight of and betraying the oppressed and suffering. Wherever in this process we find ourselves in a position of power, we are called to speak out and lend the less powerful a voice.

‘Work of the negative’ is a deconstruction of social and political oppression and alienation but also an uncovering of the structures of self-deception that attempt to shortcut the fundamental uncertainty and openness of human existence (Cf. Angehrn 2018, p. 80). The two are intrinsically linked, as “[e]xperiences of the reality of negativity, of illness, violence, and injustice can deprive the subject of the possibility of coming to terms with [themselves] and of making sense of the world” (Angehrn 2018, p. 78), yet they cannot be reduced to each other. The perspective of a work of the negative as a response to experiences or concepts that challenge propositional arguments allows for a critique of existing conditions, as well as for an exploration of alternatives that transcend present reality. It is a starting point for exploring creative and critical dimensions of negative

spirituality, which allows us to imagine what community beyond the limits of place and time might look like and explore new and 'atopic' possibilities of shared life (Cf. [Hollywood 2020](#), p. 33). It does not aim to articulate a positive identity; rather, it aims to open up space that a diverse community can inhabit. This focus on the 'here and now' that is not directed toward a utopic future but provides a hyper-realistic sense for the present that treasures the diversity and complexity of the given community and the experiences of its members is the base for a negative work as a process toward radical otherness (Cf. [Justaert 2018](#)). I suggest that the concept of negative work allows us to hold together a radical openness toward each other's truth and, simultaneously, a commitment to liberation that does not succumb to relativism or weak progressivism.

The work of MC builds on the idea of particularity and contextualization as a process of "patient restlessness" (Cf. [Barnes S. J. 2020](#), p. 627), which precludes definite answers and focuses on 'negative' spiritual and social spaces. Rather than starting from positive concepts (such as power, structure, etc.), MC takes its starting point in negative experiences and dynamics that each individual contributes to the spiritual work of movements (e.g., experiences of oppression, doubt, a sense of wonder, etc.). It uses them to transform a community's outlook on their resources and assets in a way that values incoherencies and individuality and breaks and gaps within one's story, rather than smoothing them over to create a centralized narrative. It offers a space to explore different ways of being beyond monolithic narratives, e.g., through lament, ritual, and art (Cf. [Hinze 2018](#), p. 269). It provides space for the expression of personal and collective suffering, grief, frustration, and despair but also for a potential rearticulation of hopes and dreams beyond the limitations of the present reality. As Maia Duerr notes: "chaplains can play a role in challenging the stories that have been handed down to us and inviting people to create new stories and possibilities, both individually and collectively" ([Duerr 2012](#), p. 29). This approach moves away from models of religious and spiritual expertise toward a shared and democratic understanding of the role that spirituality can play within a movement. While basic guidelines and an understanding of best practices and safeguarding are essential for this work, it also dares to open spaces to an unknown, chaotic, and unpredictable dynamic, but also for laughter and creativity (Cf. [Duerr 2012](#), pp. 37–39). In this sense, MC is an excellent example of embodied recontextualization that applies traditional religious teaching and allows for it to be critically exposed to the reinterpretation within a movement (e.g., the reading of Bible passages in the context of protests).

This is the starting point for an understanding of Movement Chaplaincy as negative work. It is deconstructing the old but also articulating a 'lack' or a 'gap', i.e., something that is 'missing': lost hopes and dreams and things that should have been and could have been. It is a process of intellectual 'deconstruction', of letting go of what you thought you knew, rethinking a project in a new and creative way, or recognizing when it is time to part from initial expectations and goals. Nevertheless, even more, it provides a space for emotional and spiritual negativity and contrast, i.e., a divergence between what is and what ought to be. It makes space for grief and despair, anger, hopelessness, and exhaustion, where religious narratives and images can be questioned, parted from, or rearticulated: a space where it is allowed to not have the answers, and where, often, questions are the more appropriate response. This open and dynamic approach makes Chaplaincy work a 'risky' business—just like hospitality. What will happen when we allow the unknown and strange in? When we let go of expectations, and maybe even hopes and dreams? When we open a space for people to tell their story in its 'raw' version? What will happen when we allow the 'other' in—the human other and possibly the divine? Chaplaincy is most needed at the 'borders' and transitions: at times and in places when the traditional rules of making sense of our experiences and narratives do not apply anymore, and we have not found new rules yet. MC explores the "in-between" spaces that do not allow for a simple one-sided answer or rejection—as Kevin Hart explains, what religious thought does is to "keep the negative and positive in play" ([Hart 1997](#), p. 273; cf. also [Abraham 2014](#), p. 225).

While Movement Chaplaincy emphasizes the necessity of a fundamental power analysis to dismantle structures of oppression and marginalization, it also does not reduce power to position, physical force, money, and numbers but believes “in the power of prayer” (Salvatierra 2014, p. 74). This does not mean a reductionistic spiritualization of activism but creating an alternative space where activists can reflect on and articulate the potential and limitations of power structures. For example, liturgical rituals might create space and “a way to be in the world in contrast to the rituals of consumer capitalism” (Salvatierra 2014, p. 130). This ‘other time’ and ‘other space’ interrupts the ‘routine’ of activist engagement and allows for new perspectives and creative approaches. In this sense, MC is a ‘disruptive’ practice that challenges the predominant discourse within a movement and makes space for the ‘other’ narratives and voices such as disappointment, estrangement, and rearticulated identities.

4. Towards an Apophatic Spirituality

“Perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, “I am what I do” (Lewis 1974, p. 179). C.S. Lewis

Having outlined negative work as a focal point for the study of MC, this section will ask what kind of spirituality resonates with this work of community building and overcoming biases. While traditional approaches to political theology focus on hierarchical structures and representative power, recent studies have explored the potential of a ‘negative political theology’. They argue that negative and apophatic spiritual practices are much more closely related to new forms of voluntary association and community (Cf. Newman 2020, p. 435). This article suggests that negative work is an integral part of Chaplaincy work as a wider strategy to inhabit and create open spaces for emotional and spiritual engagement. This section will explore how negative spirituality reflects the work of MC in its creation and inhabiting of negative spaces.⁹

Negative spirituality emphasizes the process and practice of ‘unsaying’ and ‘negating’ as a connection point between the human and the divine (Cf. Sölle 2006, p. 94). As the human soul gets more and more detached from any positive ‘ground’ and any ‘justification’ of its being, it becomes more open for a union with God’s otherness where “distinct names and pronouns, illustrative of an illusory reality of separateness, dissipate in an abyss of oneness” (Radler 2020, p. 316; cf. also Sheldrake 2020, p. 550). Negative work as a lens analyzes spirituality as an expression of a transformative process that ventures into the negation and creative rearticulation of the self and its relationship to the world. This understanding moves beyond an early modern concept of apophatic spirituality as ‘technology of the self’ by focusing precisely on its unpredictable and paradoxical elements (Cf. Barnes S. J. 2020, pp. 6–8). The idea of a ‘negative’ connection with God opens up a space to explore new and creative ways to allow human community and action to be shaped by a renewed understanding of the divine (Cf. Hollywood and Smith 2020, p. 495). This does not foreclose or outweigh the importance of cataphatic practices. I suggest that the focus on a work of the negative makes ‘spirituality’ accessible as a dialogue partner for political activism not only in its ‘apophatic’ (i.e., negative) but also in its ‘cataphatic’ (i.e., affirmative) expression. This essay focuses on negative spiritual practices. I suggest that the lens of a ‘negative work’ can also function as a foundation for an exploration of the creativity and subversive structures of cataphatic elements and their significance for activism as it precludes any ‘shortcut’ that passes over the reality of oppression, suffering, and (self-)deception.

The work and presence of a Movement Chaplain points toward the spiritual dimension of activist work that allows for those involved in the project of liberation to articulate their own hopes, desires, and fears beyond a level of present reality and explore ways of relating to present circumstances in renewed and critical ways (Cf. Prevot 2015, p. 236). I suggest that this work is ‘negative’ as it moves away from a conservative civic religious commitment to the status quo or a populist approach that uses religion to emphasize the distinction between the ‘we’ and the ‘other’ (Cf. Hoelzl 2020, pp. 1, 12). Instead, it focuses

on spirituality that allows for a greater sense of solidarity and potential self-critique (Cf. Hoelzl 2020, p. 14). ‘Negative’ work is a dynamic of deconstructing existing divisions and exploring creative alternatives that do not abandon the worth and value of the individual experience but offer a reinterpretation toward a greater sense of connectedness and solidarity. At the same time, it allows participants to integrate and process ambivalences, such as struggles and disappointments within a movement, experiences of burnout, hopelessness, and depression, as it provides space for incoherent and contradictory dynamics. It aims to (re-)connect activists to a “grounded non-reactive presence in the midst of challenge, conflict, or attack” (Rogers 2018, p. 35). In this sense, it opens a space for the ‘other’s truth’ without legitimizing their violent or oppressive behavior or succumbing to relativism. This focus connects Movement Chaplaincy to the project of “spiritual activism”, i.e., “a state of *conocimiento* that emerges after crisis, conflict, or tensions between the self and the world have triggered a shifting perspective to one that eschews socially constructed divisions based on identity politics; restructures the fractured mind, body and spirit; and catalyzes a desire to pursue social, economic and political justice for all” (Alemán and de Maria Olivo 2019, p. 253).

In this sense, Movement Chaplaincy is a ‘hermeneutical’ exercise as it uses traditions (texts, symbols, music, etc.) and challenges them by adapting to a new context. It creates a space for activists to be challenged and supported by traditions but also invited to contribute to them in a creative fashion. Hermeneutics argues that we need biases and ‘prejudices’ to think “fast and frugal” but, in certain contexts, these biases harm ourselves and others and therefore must be challenged and tended to carefully. Working through our own biases and assumptions and allowing for ‘otherness’ to break into the horizon of our thinking and experience is the purpose of negative work. It is not simply a process of replacing one ‘truth’ with another but a continuous engagement in critique and truth finding; not as a powerless and ‘meek’ relativism, but as a process of ‘hyperrealism’ and attentive, non-reactive presence. Negative work creates a space for ‘inconsistencies’ that cannot be reconciled in any synthesis (Vainio 2018, 158s). It does not, however, give in to a simple relativism, but in any given situation sides with the less powerful and oppressed. This brings us back to the question of whether MC can (or should) be part of any movement and support any activism. While it is true that it is part of the work of MC to emphasize the humanity and dignity of all people, it is at the same time strongly committed to a solidarity with the marginalized and a strict refusal of violent and harmful behavior. As a type of ‘compassion-based activism’, MC balances a compassionate love for our adversary with a cosmic universal inclusivity while firmly establishing limits around violation and curiously opening itself to our opponent’s truth (Rogers 2018, 39s). This dynamic between universal inclusivity and systemic critique requires an awareness of one’s own perspective and bias.

According to Robert Egan S.J., there are three primary ways to help individuals become conscious of their communally created biases (Ruffing 2001, p. 21). The first “is symbolized by ‘the stranger’, the point of view of someone who is other, who is from somewhere else, and who, in a related way, reveals something of ‘God’s radical otherness’ when the stranger breaks into one world” (Egan S. J. 1987, p. 13; quoted from Ruffing 2001, p. 21). In movements, this happens from the outside when the reason for protest is manifested in another person rather than an abstract cause or from the inside when divisions or arguments within the movement become visible. The second way is “symbolized by the ‘philosopher’ or the ‘artist’, or, I would add, a person of authentic faith, “someone who is, in some positive and profound way, detached, either at the level of mind or at the level of heart” (Egan S. J. 1987, p. 13; quoted from Ruffing 2001, p. 21) This is the most obvious connection point for MC to be a resource for challenging biases and a calm non-reactive presence that allows people to reflect critically on their own positionality but also to articulate their needs and fears. The third way is a starting point for most activist work; it is symbolized by negative experiences—misery, deprivation, suffering, protest, and conflict. These experiences are so-called ‘contrast experiences’; i.e., experiences of an absence of what ought to be.¹⁰ As a sounding board for these experiences, MC is ‘prophetic’, creating a space where a positive

reality can be articulated without turning into a positive utopia. This ‘negative spirituality’ facilitates a “transformative process that supports self-transcendence, the overcoming of two small a sense of self” (Ruffing 2001, p. 12). As an accompaniment toward a greater openness, it guides us toward a “practice of amazement [which] is also a beginning of leaving oneself, of a different freedom from one’s own fears” (Sölle 2001, p. 47). Concepts of negative spirituality such as ‘leaving oneself behind’, ‘detachment’, or ‘self-emptying’ love can easily be misread as expressions of privilege that allow individuals and communities to “let go” in the first place. I suggest that the concept of ‘negative work’ is wider and more inclusive as it allows for the articulation of ‘negative experiences’ and ‘narratives’ that account for real exclusion, oppression, and hardship. As feminist theologian Valerie Saiving Goldstein argues, the problem for marginalized groups is not self-assertion but the “underdevelopment or negation of the self”.¹¹ Part of the work of MC is to allow for the self that has been used for marginalization to surface and be articulated. This can happen through words, storytelling, art, joining the movement, or simple presence. “When we gather to dance, worship, or protest, what are we coming to know about ourselves, and what are we completing? Ultimately, these practices in their inter-/intra-personal, congregational, and civic incarnations (respectively) generate the embodied space and resources to move into our identity more fully” (Baldwin 2018, p. 71).

While activist movements are already a response to ‘negative experiences’, to suffering, injustice, and oppression, MC works with the negative experiences within a movement—from effects of ongoing oppression to additional stressors and trauma linked to activist work (e.g., traumatic experiences during protests, activist burnout, etc.). It holds together an attentive openness to the “«mysterious, pulsing, vibrating, flowing process of spirit» and the witness to the uniquely troubling, and even apocalyptic, signs of our times and jointly forge new ways of prophetic pastoral care” (Walsh 2018, p. 53). Negative spirituality is a spiritual practice that emphasizes negative, ‘apophatic’ elements in our relationship to the divine: a process of a contemplative ‘letting-go’ of traditional assumptions and positive concepts, of detachment, and of the present, and a growing presence for ‘otherness’. It is a “prayer against closure, against turning the latest and best creations of discourse into idols” (Caputo 1989, p. 34). It keeps the discourse open and challenges hasty answers. This perspective supports movements when they are confronted with failure and the experience of despair. As the Christian mystic Thomas Merton puts it: “Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything” (Merton 1993). The act of striving toward a better and more just future is balanced with the experience of a prioritization of the ‘here and now’. The realization that the work and the commitment of activism matter: the repetition, the disappointment, and that even when they do not yield results, they are inscribed in a greater reality that strives toward solidarity and justice. This is not simply a turn toward ‘positive thinking’ or toxic optimism that insists that things ‘are not that bad’ or are ‘part of some greater plan’; instead, it is a radical acceptance of a ‘dark night’, and the unjustifiable reality of suffering and death—and, at the same time, a ‘reclaiming’ of life and hope amidst them.¹²

5. Conclusions

Engaging with the concept of negative work as a focal point, this article has argued that Movement Chaplaincy provides a relevant starting point for theological discourse—from practical theological perspectives (e.g., what kind of approaches are used to engage various groups within a movement, how do different rituals work in an interfaith context, etc.), but also from a systematic theological point of view. It raises questions about what the spirituality of activism can teach us about God’s presence in the world, but also addresses the question of what it means to be ‘God’s people’ in this time and place (from a Christian

perspective, what it means to be ‘Church’). At the same time, it connects traditions of apophatic spirituality. It allows for a hermeneutical recontextualization (e.g., how do experiences of exclusion and marginalization shape an image of the divine as “radical other”? How does apophatic praxis inspire engagement for social justice and political resistance?). Finally, as there is an increasing need to bridge between expressions of faith, spirituality, and ‘secular’ institutions, it is vital to include MC in any discussion of the role of Chaplains and the nature of Chaplaincy for an exploration of renewed religious leadership structures.

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Notes

- ¹ In a previous article, I used the term “travail of the negative” to distinguish the term from ideas of productivity and narrow understandings of work in an economical sense. In this context, I use the term “work” to emphasize the common nature and holistic nature of the dynamic.
- ² While originally developed in a military context, the role was later adapted to a variety of secular settings (e.g., healthcare, education). Cf. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chaplain>, accessed on 6 August 2022.
- ³ (Duerr 2012, p. 9); Prominent among the spiritual leaders were leaders Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr., who were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement, advocating for social change through non-violence and spirituality. Thurman, a philosopher and mentor to King, emphasized love and empathy as key to achieving justice, shaping King’s beliefs profoundly. King’s leadership, inspired by Thurman, centered on non-violent protests and civil disobedience, rooted in Christian teachings and Gandhi’s principles. Both leaders championed the transformative power of love and resilience in the face of oppression, sparking a movement that challenged racial inequality and inspired generations to strive for justice peacefully. Cf. (Hedin 2015).
- ⁴ Cf. https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTrfjS2ShXDMnS0fVTNf6VniYwPyI5aBfv82AKSCDBs-mHr4-8PTQ2cSLGyAxzCP11TH5DN3MyT8mkz/pub?urp=gmail_link&gxids=7628, accessed on 6 August 2022.
- ⁵ <https://acpe.edu/> accessed on 24 August 2022.
- ⁶ (Walsh 2018, p. 45) The term was first elaborated systematically and theologically by Gerkin and Graham.
- ⁷ <https://abigailclauhs.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/the-protest-chaplains-handbook-complete-pdf.pdf>, p. 4, accessed on 6 August 2022.
- ⁸ This hermeneutic understanding of the role of a Movement Chaplain resonates well with an approach that emphasizes Chaplaincy as a ‘meaning-making’ process: cf. (Grefe et al. 2022).
- ⁹ This essay focuses on the connection of negative spirituality and negative work in the context of Movement Chaplaincy. For a more detailed analysis on the potential of negative work for the study of mysticism and negative spirituality, cf. (Wolff 2023a, 2023b).
- ¹⁰ According to Walter Brueggemann’s brief classical book *Prophetic Imagination* (Brueggemann 1978), the prophets suffer from the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be and are unable to maintain the “false consciousness”; (Ruffing 2001, p. 10).
- ¹¹ (Goldstein 1960) Goldstein writes specifically about women, but her argument will be applicable to other marginalized groups; cf. also (Newheiser 2020a, p. 8).
- ¹² Further research will be needed to explore to what extent this approach can be applied to other forms of Chaplaincy work.

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