

Theological Trends

The study of spirituality

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SPIRITUALITY HAS BECOME AN INDUSTRY on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of the people who read spirituality books or listen to best-selling CDs of plainchant are also suspicious of religious institutions and dogma. Coherent belief systems and commitment to faith communities are no longer assumed to be necessary for a spiritual quest. The new spirituality is often labelled New Age. It tends to be eclectic and to concentrate on interiority and self-improvement. There is something of a supermarket atmosphere coupled with a certain anti-intellectualism. Many commentators interpret this contemporary search for 'spirituality' as a replacement for traditional 'religion' and understand it to be a reflection of the wider western cultural fragmentation popularly known as postmodernity.

In the face of this phenomenon, some Christian theologians are understandably suspicious about 'spirituality' in general, in terms both of its content and its effects. Despite these difficulties, spirituality is gradually being accepted as an academic field in the context both of comparative religion and of theology. This essay attempts to offer a broad overview of this development and its difficulties, particularly in the English-speaking world. I will limit myself to a consideration of spirituality as a developing field in relation to Christian theology.¹

Spirituality in the academy

'Spirituality' is a word that is sometimes difficult to define. There have been attempts to bypass the assumptions of particular religious traditions. However, there are problems of coherence in this approach.² In Christian terms, a working definition of 'spirituality' might be as follows. It describes the ways that individuals and groups seek to enter into a conscious relationship with God, to worship, to formulate their deepest values and to create appropriate lifestyles in dialogue with their beliefs about God, the human person and creation. As an academic field, spirituality studies this dimension of human experience and behaviour from historical, textual, theological and, as we shall see, other points of view.

An increasing number of academic institutions on both sides of the Atlantic now offer spirituality within the theology and religious studies curriculum. There are also graduate programmes in the field as well as research opportunities. The theological approach to spirituality is generally multidisciplinary and involves Scripture, history, systematics, textual criticism, hermeneutics and sometimes pastoral studies. Often spirituality overflows the boundaries of theology into a broader conversation with other fields like anthropology, psychology or literature. New journals have appeared with the aim of encouraging a scholarly approach to the field.³ A scholarly network, the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, has also been founded in association with the American Academy of Religion.

The study of spirituality is less well developed in Britain and Ireland than in North America. With few academic posts in the field, and no prominent research centre or scholarly network, spirituality lacks a high profile. Theology departments, haunted by the ghost of post-Enlightenment 'objective knowledge', are often suspicious of so-called 'practical' subjects and there has been a general decline in courses in church-related theology such as ecclesiology or liturgy. A long-standing tradition of separation between theology and spirituality means that the words are interpreted as concerned, respectively, with the intellectual and devotional aspects of Christianity. Spirituality is thought to be 'soft' and lacking in rigour because disconnected from red-blooded doctrine. There is some resentment that spirituality refuses simply to be the lap-dog of systematics.

Is it fair to accuse spirituality of not being precise about its methodology? In fact significant steps have been taken in recent years to provide greater coherence.⁴ Whatever the misgivings, spirituality is taking shape as a substantial field with a special, but not exclusive, relationship to theology. Yet the debate about the shape of spirituality has not yet reached a definitive conclusion. There seem to be four points of consensus.

First, spirituality relates to all aspects of the theological curriculum and not just to systematics. Second, it is involved in interdisciplinary conversations with other fields. Third, the study of spirituality demands a proper grasp of historical method and of the historical process. Fourth, although scholars often adopt different approaches to the field (historical-contextual, hermeneutical and theological), these are not mutually exclusive but complementary. The continuing debate concerns *how* spirituality relates specifically to theology.

Theology in practice

In terms of this debate, the identities of both theology and spirituality have changed in recent decades. Each has moved away from abstract theory to a greater reflection on experience. This very journal has shifted since the 1960s from themes such as 'Grace', 'The cross' and 'Divine providence' to more experiential starting points such as 'Ageing' or 'Relationships'. Matters have progressed since the 1950s when Thomas Merton suggested that the technical language of theology, as opposed to literature, did not provide him with what he needed to articulate his understanding of contemplation.⁵

We are now more aware that theology is always founded upon and sustained by spiritual experience. Theology needs to be *lived* as well as studied. Theology as a whole, not merely spirituality, demands a practical dimension. In an academic context, this implies that what is sometimes called 'pastoral' theology is not an optional extra. However, the place of 'practice' in theology implies more than this. A theologian is a *theological person*, not merely someone who uses theological tools. Personal faith is inextricably bound up with theological investigation.

Being a theological person involves more than intellectual capacities. *Theologia*, which is often rather different from 'the theology of the academy', inevitably involves what Eastern Orthodox Christianity has termed *theoria*. This is better translated as 'contemplation' than 'theory'.⁶ The committed believer is one who *lives* theology rather than studies it with detachment. Theology is performative rather than purely informative; concerned with action rather than simply ideas. The task of a 'theologian' should not imply specialized analysis carried out while standing at a personal distance from the subject. Contemporary scholars of spirituality not only accept the self-implicating nature of their field but remind us that theology as a whole is self-implicating.

The self-implicating nature of a discipline does not exclude a critical approach but this is the servant of theology, not its purpose. A kind of transformation is implied by the thirst for knowledge. Such a view is increasingly accepted by theologians like David Tracy.

'Saying the truth' is distinct from, although never separate from, 'doing the truth' . . . More concretely, there is never an authentic disclosure of truth which is not also transformative.⁷

Does a faith-based understanding of theology exclude it from universities that espouse pluralism rather than sectarianism? In reality, if religions are not treated as *faiths* we will not understand them at all. This does not imply that to study theology demands commitment to a faith community. However, it does mean that true study confronts us with the truth claims it embodies. The 'nonjudgemental neutrality' that sometimes characterizes universities ultimately undermines intellectual ideals. In that sense, it is vital for the academic world to re-engage with questions of truth.⁸

Theologians and mysticism

The re-engagement of theology with spirituality has been helped by an interest in the theological possibilities of mysticism. Karl Rahner and Rowan Williams have affirmed that mysticism is central to the theological enterprise.⁹ It is another way of knowing. Recently, David Tracy has suggested that 'we may now learn to drop earlier dismissals of "mysticism" and allow its uncanny negations to release us'.¹⁰ This reflects Tracy's own movement towards a conviction that apophatic mysticism is where today's theologians must turn.

As critical and speculative philosophical theologians and artists learn to let go into the sensed reality of some event of manifestation, some experience of releasement and primal thinking, a sense of the reality of mystical experience can begin to show itself in itself. Even those with no explicit mystical experience, like myself, sense that thinking can become thanking, that silence does become, even for an Aquinas when he would 'write no more', the final form of speech possible to any authentic speaker.¹¹

The mystic is one who is brought to the frontiers of language and to the edge of mystery. Michel de Certeau has drawn parallels between mystics and the postmodern suspicion of definitive knowledge. Both the mystic and the postmodern person live in a movement of perpetual departure. They are wanderers and pilgrims lost in 'the totality of the immense'. Each of them 'with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*, one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*'.¹² The problem with a purely intellectual quest is that it can regard its objective as attainable. The reality of 'God' is not like this. If we can speak of the human search for God, it will be a search that continually fails to 'find' God in a definitive sense.

How do theology and spirituality relate?

Overall, most scholars agree that it is important to overcome the division between the experience of faith and intellectual reflection upon it. Theology disconnected from spirituality becomes abstract and disengaged. Spirituality cut adrift from theology loses touch with the 'Great Tradition' of faith.

But how do theology and spirituality actually relate? There are broadly two schools of thought. The first defends spirituality as a separate field while related to theology. The second prefers to treat spirituality as a distinctive but not autonomous element of theology.

An important proponent of the first position is Sandra Schneiders. She has published several ground-breaking articles on spirituality as a discipline and its methodology.¹³ Schneiders believes that spirituality and theology are mutually interactive partners that respect each other's autonomy. Theology cannot ultimately *contain* spirituality because the latter is essentially interdisciplinary. The dominance of purely theological frameworks tends to exclude a proper study of how spiritual traditions overflow such boundaries. For this reason we cannot apply purely doctrinal criteria to evaluate spiritual traditions.

The late Walter Principe offered some support for Schneiders' analysis when he suggested that 'spirituality' was a fruitful arena for Christians and non-Christians to encounter each other. Here, rather than in pure theology, non-Christian insights may challenge Christian assumptions and suggest fruitful new lines of enquiry.¹⁴

The second viewpoint is represented by the outstanding scholar of mysticism, Bernard McGinn. He believes that spirituality has priority in its partnership with theology. In that sense he rejects the old-fashioned view that spirituality simply derives from dogmatic theology. Nevertheless, McGinn believes that, practically speaking, spirituality is best studied within a combination of theological disciplines such as systematics, ethics and the history of Christianity. Following von Balthasar, McGinn also believes that the particularity of Christianity demands that theology supply the primary criteria of interpretation for spirituality.¹⁵

Others who defend the theological nature of 'spirituality' describe it in terms of what used to be known in Roman Catholic circles as 'spiritual theology'. Here, 'spirituality' is a theological sector concerned with Christian practices. Interestingly, this is true of two contemporary writers who are not Roman Catholics, the American Lutheran Bradley Hanson and the British Anglican Kenneth Leech.¹⁶

More recently, some British and American scholars have tried to bypass the constraints imposed by the sharp juxtaposition of views just outlined.¹⁷ They argue that the relationship between spirituality and theology is fundamental without denying that spirituality can be seen as a distinct field. The important word is 'distinct'. In different ways, the new wave of writers reject attempts by systematic or fundamental theologians to squeeze spirituality into tidy systems. There is talk of the need for a 'turn to spirituality' within theology overall. Theology must come to realize more effectively its own spiritual core. It must also enter into dialogue with spirituality in a way parallel to, yet radically different from, its more familiar conversation with philosophy. Theological discourse will be questioned by the insight that God is beyond philosophical concepts and is more likely to be encountered by the kind of knowledge described by mystics.

I believe that the 'spiritual theology' model is unsatisfactory on its own. Spirituality is more than simply a slice of the theological cake. Contemporary interdisciplinary emphases cannot satisfactorily be reduced to theological methods alone. It is also difficult to avoid the historical evidence that spiritual traditions arise from the realities of human existence rather than from abstract ideas. At best, 'spiritual theology', the theology of certain Christian practices such as prayer, is merely one aspect of a much wider reality called 'spirituality'.¹⁸

We could visualize the relationship between theology and spirituality in terms of two overlapping, non-concentric circles. This posits a necessary relationship without containing spirituality exclusively within theology. The weakness of the model is that it also suggests that there are areas of theology untouched by spirituality and vice versa. Perhaps a more fruitful model may be portrayed as a wheel surrounding an axle. The 'wheel' of theology rotates around an axis that is spirituality. Yet the image is three-dimensional and therefore suggests that spirituality reaches outwards into another dimension.

Disciplines, boundaries and the interdisciplinary

The growth in recent years of interdisciplinary encounters owes something to the disconcerting nature of postmodernism I mentioned earlier. The rationalist approach to knowledge tended to favour inwardly consistent but mutually exclusive disciplines. Specialization, purity and the isolation of specific areas of study was the predominant ethos. This emphasis on the difference between disciplines discouraged interdisciplinary conversation. The assumptions behind these tend-

encies have recently been questioned and the mood has changed. This has its effect on theology as much as on other fields. In our postmodern era, the identity of an academic discipline is no longer to be found in maintaining 'hard' boundaries but in blurred edges and boundaries that are crossed. This shift has been characterized as 'a centrifugal, rather than a centripetal, sense of disciplinary identity'.¹⁹ The word that best characterizes the new situation is a 'conversation' between different perspectives and methods in the search for meaning.

One fruitful dialogue is between spirituality and ethics. This is ironic given that old-style Roman Catholic theology unhelpfully made ascetical theology a subdivision of moral theology. Both moral theology and ascetical theology were preoccupied with sinfulness and the enfeebled nature of the human condition. This overpowered serious theological consideration of holiness and gave the impression that ascetical theology had little if anything to say theologically in its own right. It appeared to deal merely with some subsidiary aspects of the 'moral life'.²⁰

Nowadays, moral theology has ceased to be concerned primarily with the quality of actions. There has been a shift from action to human agent. Spirituality and moral theology find a common language in renewed understandings of personhood and grace. There is an increasing awareness of the basic unity between the moral and spiritual life. A number of writers suggest that the joint task of spirituality and moral theology is to explore a new understanding of 'virtue' and 'character' (what we should *be*, rather than do, in order to become fully human persons). Moral theologians increasingly emphasize that the ultimate guide to goodness lies not in rules but in the activity within us of the Holy Spirit.²¹ Some of the most explicit reflection on the relationship between spirituality and ethics is in the writings of Christian feminist theologians.²²

'Context' is an essential element in the modern study of spirituality. This is a concept imported from history and the social sciences.²³ 'Context' has become the primary hermeneutical framework in the study of spiritual traditions. Spiritual experience is always determined to some degree by culture. Contextual approaches to spirituality seek to address not merely religious issues but the situation of traditions within their social contexts. 'Context' is not a 'something' added to or subtracted from spiritual experience. As Michel de Certeau showed, it is the element within which experiences take their forms and expressions.²⁴

De Certeau's assertions about culture and context are now broadly accepted. However, the way in which contextual studies have developed has its problems. The history of spirituality has often come to mean the study of how religious attitudes are conditioned by culture and society. This brings historical spirituality close to the study of *mentalités*, or world-views, beloved of modern French historians. This 'social' version of history is itself informed by anthropology and sociology. The limitation of this approach in reference to spirituality is that it tends to abandon theological sources and theological questions. We need a middle way between the older (exclusively theological) approach and the newer stress on social contexts.²⁵

Four relatively recent 'conversations' are particularly striking. First, a socio-political approach has been particularly noticeable in liberationist and feminist approaches. It is gradually becoming a common aspect of more general studies in the field. Second, particularly in the English-speaking world, novels and poetry frequently address deep issues of meaning and belief. The 'unthematic', and even agnostic, spirituality in contemporary literature is attracting increasing attention.²⁶ Third, there is a growing interest in the dialogue between spirituality and science.²⁷

Finally, one of the most controversial conversations is between spirituality and psychology. References are too numerous to list.²⁸ While psychology is an important dimension of spirituality, it has limitations if given disproportionate attention. For example, psychological terminology at times becomes a substitute for engagement with the Christian tradition. At other times it has encouraged a thoroughly *uncontextual* approach to the past. Most worrying of all, spirituality as a field of study is undermined by books that blend a superficial approach to the great traditions with 'popular' psychology. At worst, some of this writing is dangerously naïve. At best it perpetuates a theologically lightweight, individualistic, self-help approach to the spiritual quest.

The rise of a more interdisciplinary approach to study does not favour grand systems because the material nowadays is so broad. The field of spirituality increasingly resists a total approach by single scholars. It is the age of monographs with limited focuses, collected papers and encyclopaedia articles. The essay seems to be replacing architectonic structures. An essay, after all, is not merely a more informal, modest and open-ended piece of prose. It is, in its fundamental sense, an experiment, a trial, a first tentative attempt at learning.

Conclusions

Finally, what use are spirituality and theology to each other? Theology undoubtedly provides criteria for evaluating spirituality. Spirituality obviously needs tools to analyse and to evaluate different traditions, texts and practices. Given the plurality of contemporary approaches to spirituality, and the apparent novelty of some of them, the question of criteria for assessing what is 'authentic' from a Christian perspective takes on greater significance. Such criteria will be based on central theological principles developed within the faith community.

Spirituality also offers criteria for judging theology.

Spirituality [is] that which keeps theology to its proper vocation, that which prevents theology from evading its own real object. Spirituality does not really answer the question, Who is God? but it preserves the orientation, the perspective, within which this question remains a question that is being evaded or elided.²⁹

Furthermore, spirituality is the unifying factor that underlies all attempts to 'do' theology or, more properly, *be* a theologian. Scholars of spirituality believe that it is a kind of Ricoeurian 'field-encompassing field'. This suggests that spirituality has a unique capacity to integrate the multiple disciplines of theology which have become fragmented or even mutually suspicious.³⁰

Spirituality offers a critique of attempts by theology to launch itself into some stratosphere of timeless truth or abstract definition. The way that spirituality 'speaks' of God is radically different from systematics. Theology needs to allow its explanations to be questioned. It will find that spirituality recognizes that what is implied by the word 'God' cannot be spoken completely. In that way 'spirituality' prevents theology from escaping the elusiveness that matters most – that of God. Spirituality ultimately drives theology beyond words into silence – not the silence of meaninglessness but one that, paradoxically, speaks of infinite presence.

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NOTES

1 The different approaches to the discipline were recognized by the University of London in the early 1990s when it allowed the creation of two MAs in spirituality, one comparative and the other Christian.

2 See, for example, Jon Alexander, 'What do recent writers mean by spirituality?' in *Spirituality Today* 32 (1980), pp 247–256.

3 Apart from the long-established *The Way* and its Supplements, there are now *Studies in Spirituality*, begun in 1991 in The Netherlands, *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, begun in 1993 in the United States, and the journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Some other American theology journals such as *Horizons* and *Theological Studies* have also done a great deal to encourage solid writing in the field.

4 For example: Edward Kinerk, 'Towards a method for the study of spirituality' in *Review for Religious* 40/1 (1981), pp 3–19; Walter Principe, 'Towards defining spirituality' in *Sciences Religieuses* 12/2 (1983), pp 127–141; Sandra Schneiders, 'Theology and spirituality: strangers, rivals or partners?' in *Horizons* 13/2 (1986), pp 253–274; also 'Spirituality in the academy' in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), pp 676–697; 'Spirituality as an academic discipline: reflections from experience' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Fall 1993), pp 10–15; and 'A hermeneutical approach to the study of Christian spirituality' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Spring 1994), pp 9–14; Bradley Hanson (ed), *Modern Christian spirituality: methodological and historical essays* (Atlanta, 1990), Part One: 'What is spirituality?'; 'Theological approaches to spirituality: a Lutheran perspective' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Spring 1994), pp 5–8; Otger Steggink, 'Study in spirituality in retrospect' in *Studies in Spirituality* 1 (1991), pp 5–23; Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and history: questions of interpretation and method* (New York, 1992; London, revised edition, 1995), chapter 2; Kees Waaijman, 'Toward a phenomenological definition of spirituality' in *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993), pp 5–57; Bernard McGinn, 'The letter and the spirit: spirituality as an academic discipline' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Fall 1993), pp 1–10.

5 Thomas Merton, *Sign of Jonah* (New York, 1953), pp 8–9.

6 See John Meyendorff, *Byzantine theology* (New York, 1974), Introduction; also Vladimir Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1973), chapter 1.

7 David Tracy, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (New York, 1991 edition), pp 77–78. See the whole of chapter 2: 'A theological portrait of the theologian'.

8 See, for example, Edward Farley, 'The structure of theological study' in Robin Gill (ed), *Readings in modern theology* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp 255–266, reprinted from *The fragility of knowledge: theological education in the Church and the university* (Philadelphia, 1988).

9 Karl Rahner, 'The theology of mysticism' in K. Lehmann and L. Raffelt (eds), *The practice of faith: a handbook of contemporary spirituality* (New York, 1986), pp 70–77. Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London, 1991), chapter 5: 'Mysticism and incarnation'.

10 Tracy, *Analogical imagination*, p 360.

11 Tracy, *Analogical imagination*, p 385.

12 Michel de Certeau, *The mystic fable* vol 1 (ET, Chicago, 1992), p 299. The emphases are the author's.

13 See the references in note 5.

14 Walter Principe, 'Spirituality, Christian' in Michael Downey (ed), *A new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 931–938.

15 McGinn, *op. cit.*, pp 1–10.

16 Bradley Hanson, 'Spirituality as spiritual theology' in B. Hanson (ed), *Modern Christian spirituality: methodological and historical essays* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp 45–51, and 'Theological approaches to spirituality: a Lutheran perspective' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2/1 (Spring 1994), pp 5–8; Kenneth Leech, *True God: an exploration in spiritual theology* (London: Sheldon Press, 1985).

- 17 See the articles in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 3/2 (Fall 1995): Philip Endean, 'Theology out of spirituality: the approach of Karl Rahner', pp 6–8; Mark McIntosh, 'Lover without a name: spirituality and constructive Christology today', pp 9–12; J. Matthew Ashley, 'The turn to spirituality? The relationship between theology and spirituality', pp 13–18; Anne M. Clifford, 'Re-memembering the spiritual core of theology: a response', pp 19–21.
- 18 See Josef Sudbrack on p 151 of his article 'Spirituality' in Karl Rahner et al. (eds), *Sacramentum mundi: an encyclopedia of theology* (ET New York: Herder & Herder/London: Burns & Oates, 1970), volume 6.
- 19 Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley (eds), *Sacred places and profane spaces: essays in the geographics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Westport CT, 1991), p 178.
- 20 See, for example, Keith Egan, 'The divorce of spirituality from theology' in Patrick Carey and Earl Muller (eds), *Theological education in the Catholic tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp 296–307, especially 301–304.
- 21 An accessible overview of these shifts of perspective in moral theology is in Kevin Kelly, *New directions in moral theology: the challenge of being human* (London, 1992), especially chapter 2. See also James M. Gustafson, 'The idea of Christian ethics' in Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (eds), *Companion encyclopedia of theology* (London, 1995), pp 691–715. See also a recent collection of essays, *Spirituality and ethics*, in *The Way Supplement* 88 (Spring 1997).
- 22 For example, Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating conscience: feminist explorations in Catholic moral theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996), chapter 6, and 'Ethics and spirituality: the social justice connection' in *The Way Supplement* 63 (1988), pp 103–116.
- 23 On context and spirituality, see Steegink, *op. cit.*, pp 12–14, Waaijman, *op. cit.*, pp 39–42 and Sheldrake, *Spirituality and history*, pp 58, 84–86, 167–168.
- 24 See 'Culture and spiritual experience' in *Concilium* vol 19 (1966), *Spirituality in the secular city*, pp 3–31.
- 25 See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp 3–6; also Columba Stewart, 'Asceticism and spirituality in Late Antiquity: new vision, impasse or hiatus?' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 4/1 (Summer 1996), pp 11–15.
- 26 A good overview of the issues is provided by *The Way Supplement* 81 (Autumn 1994), *Spirituality, imagination and contemporary literature*.
- 27 For example, *The Way* 32/4 (October 1992), 'Mysticism, spirituality and science'.
- 28 This relationship was examined more critically in a collection of essays published by *The Way Supplement* 69 (Autumn 1990), *Spirituality and psychology*.
- 29 Andrew Louth, *Theology and spirituality*, Fairacres Publications 55 (Oxford: SLG Press, 1978), p 4.
- 30 See Alan Jones, 'Spirituality and theology' in *Review for Religious* 39/2 (March 1980), pp 161–176, and Sandra Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the academy', pp 676–697.