

# TEACHING SPIRITUALITY

## Context, Practice, Scholarship and Formation

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THE MONASTERIES OF METEORA in Greece perch on towering rock formations. They stand apart from the villages below, separate, intriguing, witnessing to something of another world. The word 'Meteora' means literally 'hovering in the air', and indeed these communities seem to hover between worlds. As I entered Agios Nikolaos I felt that I was crossing a threshold, symbolized by the wrap-around skirt I donned at the entrance and the candle I lit upon entering the dim church.

Several hours away, the basilica of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki stands in the midst of the second largest city in Greece. Yet here, too, I sensed that I had crossed a threshold. I recall the experience of palpable beauty as I entered the church. Chants filled the air as people moved fluidly among the gold-framed icons, kissing them, touching them. There I sat, overwhelmed by beauty and by a powerful sense that this experience was a gift. Spirituality in this place was clearly practised, embodied, received, enacted. It was as much in the air as the incense. From my outsider perspective, it was in the living liturgy of an ancient tradition that spirituality was taught, carried forward.

I sit now in my office at Boston University school of theology, holding those images of Greek monasteries and churches close as we begin another academic year. How do we teach spirituality? The question is one I have considered for some time, and I still find myself preoccupied with matters of practice, community, context and scholarship. Meteora is among the most remote of places—where the air is thin and you can still see evidence of the nets that once carried monks and nuns up the face of the high rocks. My context of teaching is an urban research university where the sounds of the subway or nearby construction often break into classrooms. As different as these places seem initially, there are some similarities, however. Meteora monasteries are rooted firmly in ancient Orthodox spiritual traditions, yet they are visited today by busloads of tourists. Remote yet

crowded. Rooted yet hospitable. My school of theology has long ties to the United Methodist Church, yet we are accountable to a secular research university. Within a mile of our university in Boston are several synagogues, a mosque, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and Christian churches of every kind—Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, Orthodox, Quaker, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ and so on. Religious pluralism is highly visible and we are quite aware of the risk of imposing our own religion on one another; this layers the teaching of spirituality with rich complications. The classroom here must rival monastic hospitality, seeking to become a welcoming space for an incredibly diverse mix of students, a space of genuine conversation and engagement across the differences.

Still, it seems like many miles to cross from the Meteora monasteries and that beautiful basilica to room 115 of the school of theology, where I am teaching ‘Spiritual Guidance in the Christian Tradition’ this autumn. The difference in the contexts of teaching spirituality strikes me—one filled with candles, incense, chanting and resplendent icons, the other containing a large block table and chairs, a blackboard and technology for PowerPoint. If the monasteries and basilica connect people to a larger ecclesial and spiritual tradition, the classroom connects people to the academy, with all its modernist ideals, presuppositions and systems of evaluation. How can we create bridges between the academy and the Church as contexts for the teaching of spirituality, so that we do not operate in separate worlds but rather inform, critique and enrich one another? How can we develop pedagogies that attend to practice, action, performance, prayer and liturgy, all essential to understanding the subject



*Basilica of St Demetrius, Thessaloniki*

matter of spirituality, in a class that does not share any single spiritual tradition? How can we bring something of the beauty of the icons into an academic teaching context—and what of spirituality is lost if we cannot?

### **Study and Formation in Academic Contexts**

What does it mean to teach spirituality in an academic context? The academy provides the necessary space, resources and critical scholarly tools to understand historical and contemporary forms of spirituality. Universities advance high-level research drawing upon multiple disciplines—ethics, history, theology, psychology, sociology, aesthetics, poetics, literary criticism, neuroscience and anthropology. Such research informs our teaching of spirituality, and the questions of our students in turn spark research. Thus, teaching and research inform one another. This is the peculiar gift of the academy as a context: the capacity to bring intellectual rigour and interdisciplinary study and research to advance understanding of and critical perspectives on spirituality. It is the task of the teacher to uphold this scholarly calling while also taking great care with the spiritual lives of students and their connections with communities of faith.

Particularly in a time when the word ‘spirituality’ has become increasingly popular and diffuse in meaning, multidisciplinary study and critical theological reflection on practice are essential. At the same time, the study of spirituality is formative. ‘Formation’ should not be understood as a matter of the heart rather than the head (a phrase too often used); such an understanding imposes an unhelpful dualism. Rather, spiritual formation is a lifelong process led by the Holy Spirit and encompassing every human faculty and capability, including the intellect.

The aims of spiritual formation, so vital to the texts that we study, cannot be kept at arm’s length. Why does an author such as Augustine (*Confessions*) or Julian of Norwich (*Revelations of Divine Love*) write? What do they hope their words will effect in the reader? Students of spirituality need not accept an author’s aims uncritically, but neither can they disregard the author’s conviction that what he or she conveys is a powerful, salvific glimpse of a grace-filled God. To read these texts is to enter, with openness as well as a questioning mind, into this possibility. The subject matter of spirituality itself calls for self-implicating and practice-orientated methods of teaching and learning. The self-implicating and formative nature of spirituality studies is widely discussed in spirituality scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Douglas Burton-Christie, ‘The Cost of Interpretation: Sacred Texts and Ascetic Practice in Desert Spirituality’, in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth

previous publications, I have outlined a practical theological approach to spirituality teaching as consonant with this.<sup>2</sup> While there are debates about the extent and manner of incorporating it into the teaching of spirituality, practice is an indispensable way or source of theological knowing—not simply the application of theological knowledge.

Teaching spirituality in the academy allows for and draws upon multidisciplinary scholarship and cutting-edge research. This is a gift of the academic context. However, that context is not unproblematic for the teaching of spirituality. Modernist assumptions still privilege ‘objectivity’ and ‘theory’ in ways that minimise the epistemic value of practice. Such assumptions must be addressed head on; both practical theology and spirituality literatures offer resources here.<sup>3</sup> Still, it is complicated to incorporate practice into the teaching of spirituality in the academy. We need to negotiate the multiple communities of practice represented among the students and the increasing reality (even in seminaries) that some students do not come from any strong religious community or tradition. To incorporate practice into teaching requires keen awareness and explicit discussion of power dynamics in the classroom and the manipulative possibilities of introducing practice in a class situation, and the complexity of grading practice-orientated assignments.

As a way to open conversation about practical theological modes of teaching spirituality, I will explore here snapshots of four specific courses in spirituality that I teach in my university position.

### **Teaching Spiritual Guidance**

In teaching about spiritual guidance, I turn to classic Christian texts to illustrate the diverse models of spiritual direction in the tradition. We study, for example, the pithy sayings of the early desert *abbas* and *ammās*; the gentle friendship of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal; the imaginative Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius; and the narrative of the Russian pilgrim who wandered in search of a way to pray without ceasing.

A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 100–107; and Elizabeth Liebert, ‘The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality’, in *Minding the Spirit*, 79–99.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Claire E. Wolfteich, ‘Devotion and the Struggle for Justice in the Farm Worker Movement: Practical Theological Approaches to Research and Teaching’, *Spiritus*, 5/2 (2005), 158–175; and Claire E. Wolfteich, ‘Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 13/1 (2009), 121–143.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, edited by Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, edited by Claire E. Wolfteich (Mahwah: Paulist, 2014); *Minding the Spirit*, throughout.

We learn about Wesleyan class meetings, Quaker clearness committees and African American ‘mentoring mothers’.<sup>4</sup> The aim is for students to come away with a sense not of a monolithic Christian tradition but rather of a rich, complex range of practices and theologies. As we study historical texts, we also read more recent literature on spiritual direction and related research, for example, on women and faith development. We meet practitioners—from a Greek Orthodox ‘spiritual father’ to a Jesuit retreat leader to a Jewish psychotherapist and spiritual director. We also engage in some comparative study of practices of spiritual guidance across faith traditions—with particular attention to Judaism, Buddhism and Christianity. This aspect of the course enables students to situate Christian practices in a wider religious landscape and to explore the increasing importance of interfaith spiritual guidance.

While not a *practicum* training course in spiritual direction, the class does aim to cultivate practices essential to spiritual guidance—such as prayer, listening and hospitality—through experiential learning, role-plays and contemplative practices. As the arts are increasingly recognized as a dimension of spiritual guidance, we also offer aesthetic approaches to teaching and learning.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the semester, students are invited to discern their own gifts for spiritual guidance in conversation with contemporary practitioners. They can also participate in optional spiritual companioning groups, where they learn group facilitation skills and benefit from a deeper level of practice and community. I understand clearly, however, that this course does not ‘certify’ or train students as spiritual directors. In a field that lacks standardised criteria, this is an important question to address: what kind of teaching, in what contexts, qualifies as adequate training? How is such training to be evaluated in academic institutions? In my view, academic institutions can enter a fruitful partnership with well-chosen external training programmes. For example, our university works with a spiritual direction training programme to offer students separate course credit for a two-year programme connected to the United Methodist Church.

Recognising student’s diverse vocations, the course encourages them to do more in-depth, practical theological work in areas of particular interest, including interfaith spiritual direction, spiritual guidance and

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Kelleman and Karole A. Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See Christine Valters Paintner and Betsey Beckman, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2010).

the arts, spiritual direction and intercultural ministry, psychology and spiritual direction, and gender and spiritual direction.

In sum, what does such a course hope to accomplish? The specified learning outcomes blend scholarly and vocational aims. They include:

- compare diverse models of spiritual direction and companionship through study of primary and secondary texts;
- articulate a theology of spiritual guidance and situate it within a range of theological perspectives and approaches embedded in texts, contexts and practices;
- discern practical wisdom and points for critical engagement in classic Christian texts of spiritual guidance in dialogue with contemporary questions, contexts and practices;
- describe several key features of Jewish and Buddhist theologies and practices of spiritual direction in dialogue with Christian theologies and practices;
- identify key practical theological issues in cross-cultural, ecumenical and interfaith spiritual guidance, as well as issues arising in direction with people who have no religious background or affiliation;
- explore the arts as a component of spiritual guidance;
- cultivate practices that embody and nourish the ministry of spiritual guidance;
- envision new or renewed practices of spiritual guidance for particular contexts and communities;
- engage and advance research in spirituality studies.

### ***Reading and Writing Spiritual Autobiographies***

From Augustine to John Bunyan, Teresa of Ávila to Gandhi, spiritual autobiographies reveal the diverse paths of religious seekers, the crises and epiphanies that became focal points of meaning and revelation. Autobiographies function as modes of confession, prayer, testimony, prophecy and introspection. As representations of the self, they open up means of exploring significant spiritual questions: who am I? How do I tell my story? What is the role of memory? How is my story situated in larger communal narratives? Thus, a course on spiritual autobiographies can open up traditions of spirituality in highly accessible and engaging ways, while inviting students to explore fundamental questions about faith,

vocation and religious experience. As I teach this subject, we study a diverse selection of texts and engage regularly in the practice of life-writing, working in small groups who share and reflect upon what they have written. Incorporating the arts in the process of life-writing, students are also invited to illustrate or weave their texts, to combine music and text, and to play with diverse forms of life writing, including poetry. Secondary scholarship—for example, on autobiography and postmodernity, gender and autobiography, conversion and testimony—provide critical scholarly tools for analysis. In my experience, the textual study and the students' own ventures in life-writing are mutually illuminating, providing questions and themes to trace, points of resonance and dissonance to be named.

Teaching spiritual autobiographies through both reading and writing also draws attention to the complexity of naming religious experience. Language simultaneously limits and opens up understanding. Memory can be faulty or incomplete—yet it is essential to the writing of autobiography. Hence, our study of autobiographies leads us to examine the nature of spirituality and theological interpretation; the role of historical and cultural context in shaping faith; poetics, testimony and spirituality; and the relationship between spirituality, bodies and religion. Through the study of spiritual autobiographies and the practice of writing spiritual autobiography, students explore fundamental questions about spirituality, including the rather basic one of how to define 'spiritual' or 'spirituality'. Such methodological questions can appear dry and theoretical in the abstract, but they morph into lively existential issues when we confront them in the process of writing our own spiritual autobiography. What do we consider 'spiritual' in our life experiences? What do we choose to include or omit in our spiritual narratives? What lived theologies (epistemology, theological anthropology, soteriology, theodicy) emerge with sharp clarity as we try to write our spiritual autobiographies?

**What do we  
consider  
'spiritual' in our  
life experiences?**

While ecclesiology may appear initially a distant concern for some students, in many classic spiritual autobiographies spirituality is inseparable from the ecclesial context. Thus, issues of how spirituality relates to the Church today arise in powerful ways as students analyze historical texts alongside their own life-writing. For some, even some preparing for ministry, it becomes apparent that their spiritual autobiographies include deeply painful experiences of alienation from the Church. Thus, discussions of ecclesiology and spirituality can become animated and, if facilitated well, create significant moments for theological reflection, discernment and growth.

Teaching spiritual autobiography, then, can be a useful avenue for teaching theology more broadly, and it naturally lends itself to the integration of study and formation. Moreover, students can do research and/or construct practical theological projects around the use of spiritual autobiography in congregational ministry, spiritual direction, retreat facilitation, college chaplaincy, hospice care and work with marginalised communities.

### **Vocation, Work and Faith**

The last time I taught ‘Vocation, Work and Faith’ we began the course in a nearby Episcopal monastery. For a weekend, our class was structured by the rhythms of monastic life: the bell called us from classroom to chapel and study was punctuated by—grounded in—prayer and song. Students, many in a monastery for the first time in their lives, adjusted their usual routines and rhythms. The evening Great Silence and the practice of silence at meals offered a deep respite for some and an uncomfortable void for others. It was here we came to begin the study of vocation and work—not to prioritise the monastic vocation but to immerse the students in a context that integrates community, prayer, work and study in ways quite unfamiliar to most. This space provided an apt place to enter into questions such as: who are we called to become? What is the meaning of our work? What is just work? These kinds of vocational questions are central to the study of work and spirituality. The course aims to respond to students’ deep questions about their own vocations while situating their questions and narratives within larger socio-economic, historical and theological analysis. As John Paul II writes in the 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens* (On Human Work), work is a key religious question that must be examined again and again in changing economic and social contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Contextual learning expands as we move from monastery to classroom to a Shabbat service to field visits at a range of sites, such as the Interfaith Worker Justice organization. Students engage with labour activists, immigrant hotel and restaurant workers, and a Franciscan monk active in the labour movement. Project-based learning allows students to relate the course to a variety of concrete contexts—for example developing a prayer service for workers in a congregation; designing Sabbath education tools for children; researching work conditions for migrant workers

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, n.1, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html).





*An Interfaith Worker Justice rally*

or professional athletes. Practical theological methods include action research,<sup>7</sup> and so students may study questions of spirituality and justice through participation in labour organizations and the development of constructive proposals for religion–labour partnerships.

In short, through their work in this course students should be able to:

- name the significance of work and vocation in their own narratives;
- describe and reflect upon the religious, theological and spiritual dimensions of work;
- analyze theologies of work and vocation arising in different Christian traditions;
- articulate their own theological understandings of work and vocation in critical dialogue with a range of other perspectives and positions;
- identify and assess significant labour issues in particular historical and contemporary contexts;
- gain skills in the practice of discernment and the facilitation of others' vocational discernment;

<sup>7</sup> See Elaine Graham, 'Is Practical Theology a Form of "Action Research"?' *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 17/1 (2013), 148–178. See also Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, 'Participatory Action Research', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 235–243; and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, 'Participatory Action Research: Practical Theology for Social Justice', *Religious Education*, 101/3 (Summer 2006), 321–329.

- understand theologies of Sabbath and cultivate Sabbath practice, informed by Jewish–Christian dialogue;
- make constructive proposals for structural change, religious engagement with labour and/or spiritual nurture of workers;
- creatively design a practical theological project related to work and vocation, and/or craft a substantial research paper on a related topic.

### ***Prayer and Social Engagement***

While spirituality is deeply personal, it should not be construed as an individualistic, private and solely interior matter. Rather, in teaching we explore relationships between spirituality and the Church, spirituality and justice, spirituality and public life. I have found case-study methods to be effective in engaging students with such topics. For example, my course entitled ‘Prayer and Social Engagement’ features contemporary and historical case studies of communities and their practices of prayer and social activism. The cases include local and international movements—for example, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the farm worker movement in the United States, pro-life and pro-choice campaigns. Exploring the cases offers students concrete ways to engage in critical theological reflection on the relationship between prayer and social engagement, action and contemplation. In keeping with practical theological interests, concrete practices in particular communities and contexts are the focal point of that reflection. As students wrestle with the theological and spiritual dilemmas raised by the cases, they begin to articulate more sharply their own visions of spirituality and examine their own practices. Each case unfolds another angle of the questions about how prayer and sociopolitical engagement relate in practice, what theological understandings ground and arise from this, conflicts of practice and implications for religious leadership and spiritual guidance.

Such an approach illustrates the interdisciplinarity of spirituality study and teaching. For example, in exploring the spirituality of Cesar Chavez and the farm worker movement, we could turn to sociology to flesh out the demographics of the migrant worker community—ethnic and racial backgrounds, religious affiliation, actual relationship to institutional religion. Students might seek out information on Saul Alinsky and the community organization approaches that so influenced Chavez and the worker movement. A historical perspective would enable us to situate Chavez and the workers in context, with an eye to influences that shaped

the development of the movement. For example, we could explore links between Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr and the non-violent civil rights movements of the 1960s. Cultural studies would provide more background on Mexican Catholicism and culture, facilitating a deeper understanding, for example, of the importance of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe and penitential practice in the worker movement. Economic studies would provide further data for comprehending the workers' economic situations and the relationships between farmers, large corporations and workers. Theologies of prayer and theological ethics would be essential dialogue partners in such study. As Sandra Schneiders has argued:

The study of spirituality as experience requires us to bring into play not only theology and historical studies, but psychology, sociology, the natural sciences, comparative religion, aesthetics, literature and the arts, and whatever other disciplines might be required by the character of the phenomenon to be studied.<sup>8</sup>

To accomplish this kind of teaching, then, will require partnerships with colleagues from across the disciplines to amplify and enrich the study of spiritual practice.

### **Key Points and Further Questions**

These snapshots of spirituality teaching point to some key insights that I have gained through my work in teaching at the intersection of practical theology and spirituality:

1. Practice is an essential component of learning in spirituality. To incorporate practice in an academic context, though, is quite complex, owing to religious pluralism, the power dynamics in a classroom and the inherent risk of separating practices from their traditional, communal (ecclesial) contexts.
2. Practice can be incorporated in academic teaching, though this is best done in an invitational manner, with ample choice and freedom preserved for students. Students should be aware that they are free to observe rather than participate in a spiritual practice. In my view, this is an inherent tension in teaching spirituality: practice is essential, and yet to compel spiritual practice as an academic requirement can be problematic.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Schneiders, 'A Hermeneutical Approach to Christian Spirituality', in *Minding the Spirit*, 52–53.

3. Awareness of the particularities of our teaching contexts is vital—as context shapes the appropriate methods of teaching spirituality. Reading our contexts, thus, is part of the work of teaching. Moreover, recognizing that there are multiple contexts in which spirituality is taught can lead to fruitful pedagogical partnerships between academic and other communities or institutions.
4. For the above reasons, and to relate spirituality to students' vocational formation, contextual learning, field research and practical theological project-based learning are significant components of the teaching of spirituality.
5. Spirituality teaching is not only cognitive but also aesthetic and kinaesthetic. Incorporating music, the arts and movement enhances the teaching of spirituality. The physical layout of our classroom spaces also matters.
6. The study of spirituality draws upon multiple disciplines—and this is one of the great strengths of the academy as a context. Adequately to access the range of disciplines that inform spirituality studies, we will need to build teaching and research partnerships across universities. This is critical, especially for doctoral work in spirituality studies, which is essential for the training of future teachers in the discipline.

The academy is an important context for research, teaching and formation. It does not operate in a vacuum, but needs to remain critically and appreciatively aware of the vital roles of families, the natural world, the workplace, social movements and faith communities in teaching spirituality. The monasteries and churches, the thresholds we cross, remind us that much spirituality is learnt in practice within a community. Academic study of spirituality does not supplant those communities, but the academic context does provide a distinctive and indispensable space for critical reflection, multidisciplinary research, hospitality and encounter across communities, and the training of future theological educators.

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