WHY DOES THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY MATTER?

Rob Faesen

SPIRITUALITY, IN ALL ITS SHAPES and forms, is very much in vogue at present. But for the *history* of Christian spirituality, this is much less the case. It appears that what happened in the past is regarded as of little relevance, and as something that, on the whole, can be disregarded. There are, however, a few fashionable exceptions—for example Meister Eckhart and the Beguines. I would like to raise the question of why the history of Christian spirituality might be very relevant, and what some important writers from the European spiritual tradition can teach us in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the first point to stress is that, in any case, the importance of spirituality is relative, and never normative. On this, the Bible could not be clearer: the only thing that really matters is to love God, with all one's heart, all one's soul and all one's mind, and this can only be done by loving one's neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:36–39). Included in the command to love one's neighbour as oneself are personal care for the neighbour, the effort to establish human, social and economic structures that are just, and to nurture and protect God's creation. The human person is called to an actively good, just and responsible life. These things are normative and indispensable.

Spirituality presupposes this; in no way are the two mutually exclusive. On the contrary, these are clearly foundational principles in the history of Christian spirituality. Over the course of the centuries, spiritual currents have occasionally appeared that attempted to bifurcate these realms, as if a person might be 'spiritual' and thereby free of any ethical imperatives. For example, one may recall the so-called movement of the 'Free Spirit' in the Rhineland of the fourteenth century.[1] In response to this movement,

[1] The 'Brethren of the Free Spirit' saw direct union with God as freeing them from observing any moral precepts. See *The Rhineland Mystics*, edited by Oliver Davies (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 19–20.

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major spiritual writers constantly reiterated that it is simply impossible to love God and at the same time not to preoccupy oneself with God's beloved creation.

Convinced as we are of the relative importance of spirituality, we raise once more the question: what can the past history of Christian spirituality teach us in the twenty-first century? I think the answer can be summarised in a single sentence: this history helps us to pay attention to the genuine encounter between God as God and the human person as human. The three elements of this sentence now have to be developed.

An Encounter with God as God

There are in the history of Christian spirituality exceptionally beautiful texts on the *mystery of God*. The great spiritual writers seem convinced, as no others, that God cannot be encompassed in human terms and concepts, and that therefore it is most important to unmask whatever serves wrongly as 'god' in order to prevent it taking the place of the true God. These authors can help us to remain alert before the absolute otherness of God. God cannot be identified with any religious experience, nor with any created thing, nor with a particular insight or concept, no matter how religious. Quite simply, God is no thing. The fourth Lateran Council (1215) has expressed this briefly and to the point: 'Between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude'.[2] This apophatic, 'negating' approach, which lays such stress on the absolute otherness of God, flows quite naturally from the concern to meet God *as God*. There are so many apparent encounters which may well appear to be religious but which in fact obscure the true living God.

God cannot be encompassed in human terms and concepts

In this approach, the human mind and human reason can play an important role. A major twelfth-century writer, William of St Thierry (*c.* 1075–1148), briefly and clearly formulated this in his book, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*. The abbot speaks about 'the two eyes needed for the love of God', one of which is human rational understanding. He says the following:

> In this they labour much, each in its own way, because one of them—reason—cannot see God except in what he is not …. What is it that

[2] *Enchiridion symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, edited by Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), n. 806.

> reason can apprehend or discover in its every attempt, about which it is so bold to say: 'this is my God?' Reason is only able to discover what he is to the extent it discovers what he is not. Reason has its own set paths and straight ways by which it progresses .... Reason, therefore, seems to advance through what God is not toward what God is.[3]

The active human understanding can never attain to God, given that God is the transcendent which evades our grasp. And precisely thanks to this insight, a meeting with God *as God* becomes possible.

Incidentally this 'negating approach' necessarily implies a (positive) notion of the living God, one that is on a much a more fundamental level than any concepts derived from insights. Indeed, it is only possible to make a negation if one has a positive knowledge. For example, I can only know whether an object is a genuine diamond or not if I have had experience of what true diamonds are. Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, in his lectures on mystical theology, refers to this: spiritual authors often use negatives when speaking of God precisely because they *do* have such a strong notion of God and of God's inexpressible otherness.

Connected with this, the unknown author whom we call Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite speaks about God as the outpouring source of light, a flow of light so strong that it is impossible for any human being to go against the current, let alone reach the source. Nevertheless occasionally human beings happen to be in that source of light.

> The divine darkness (γνόφος) is that 'unapproachable light' (1 Timothy 6:16; Exodus 20:21) where God is said to live. And if it is invisible because of a superabundant clarity, if it cannot be approached because of the outpouring of its transcendent gift of light, yet it is here that is found everyone worthy to know God and to look upon him. And such a one, precisely because he neither sees him nor knows him, truly arrives at that which is beyond all seeing and all knowledge. Knowing exactly this, that he is beyond everything perceived and conceived, he cries out with the prophet: 'Knowledge of you is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it' (Psalm 139:6). It is in this sense that one says of the divine Paul that he knew God, for he knew that God is beyond every act of mind and every way of knowing. He says too that 'inscrutable are his ways and unsearchable his judgments'

[3] William of Saint-Thierry, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*, translated by Thomas X. Davis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981), 77–78 (modified).

> (Romans 11: 33) that 'his gifts are inexpressible' (2 Corinthians 9: 15) and that 'his peace passes all understanding' (Philippians 4: 7), for he found him who is beyond all things and he knew, in a way surpassing any conception, that the cause of all surpasses all.[4]

It would take us far too long to present all the authors who have spoken about the mysterious depth of God, yet one further example is appropriate. In his well-known (but often misinterpreted) *Proslogion*, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) speaks precisely about this ungraspable mystery of God *as God*. So often this wonderful book has been misread as an 'ontological proof of God's existence', supposedly intending to give unbelievers a rational demonstration of the existence of God. But if anyone reads the book as a whole, it is clear that Anselm wishes to value as much as possible the otherness of God, and is seeking, without compromise, for the living God who cannot be contained in any human concept.

An Encounter of the Human Person as Human with God

The history of Christian spirituality offers a second consideration that deserves attention: the encounter of any man or woman with God involves *every aspect of his or her humanity*. The whole person has to meet God. Those spiritual movements that failed to recognise this, and wanted only a part of the person to meet God, were found to lack the strength to survive. The community of believers seem to have felt quite spontaneously that a one-sided approach simply was not attractive.

I give a few examples by way of illustration: the fourteenth-century movement (mentioned earlier) of the 'Free Spirit' took it for granted that if a person was spiritual, he or she could freely follow all the body's impulses. This implied a complete undervaluing of the meaning and symbolism of the human body. There were also movements in which it was human reason that was undervalued, as if the encounter with God was exclusively an affair of religious feelings. Once more such a trend lacked any strength to survive: many of the faithful felt of their own accord that this fideistic and sentimental spirituality could not satisfy them. Other phenomena were those very rational spiritual movements that reduced the encounter with God to a simple work of the understanding in which the mind was predominant. Yet again, the community of believers made short shrift of such views as people were convinced that meeting with God

[4] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987), 265–266.

was much more than what was implied by any such reduction. To sum up, history has taught that no single aspect of the human can be excluded from the encounter with God. Any healthy and mature meeting between two persons requires that each of those persons can be truly themselves. This is true of any encounter between human persons, and is equally relevant when the encounter is between human persons and God.

Above all, the history of Christian spirituality has made a very special contribution to human self-understanding. Many generations of Christian spiritual authors have understood the 'human' in three dimensions: body, soul and spirit, rather than simply in two, body and soul. As mentioned earlier, the body, with its sensuality, sensorial power, vulnerability and sexuality, had a symbolic role and meaning in any encounter with God.

Next, for the 'soul', the authors often turned to Platonic or Aristotelian categories—so not very original in themselves—which to a great extent coincide with what nowadays are called brain functions. It may be interesting to note, *en passant*, that in the opinion of many Christian spiritual writers there were within the soul three important inner powers among others: memory, intellect and will. These three powers linked the human person with the past (memory), the present (intellect) and the future (will). Present-day psychologists would certainly agree that for a man or woman links with past, present and future are indispensable for balanced health.

However, the third dimension, 'spirit', is decidedly the most interesting and original element in the self-knowledge proper to Christian spirituality. This dimension deals with the deepest 'ground' of the human person: in other words, that which gives unity to the multiplicity of bodily impressions, thoughts, feelings and decisions. From early modern times, this fundamental unity has been understood as the 'subject', the fact that a person is an 'I', autonomous and individual. The older spiritual literature, on the other hand, understood this rather as a relational unity, that is, the relationship of the creature with the Creator and the continual unbroken contact between them. Obviously it was understood that such contact was not constantly experienced as such; nevertheless it was crucial for self-knowledge of the spiritual person. Indeed, it was precisely the relation with God—giving 'being' and existence to the human being—that gave form to the inner unity with regard to whatever was happening at the bodily or psychological level.

All this allowed spiritual authors to give true value to the mysterious and unfathomable depths of the human person. In such a perspective,

the human being exists not as an individual monad, something which possibly, and in a secondary way, might develop relations with others. Rather he or she is, in reality, a relationship and an openness and thus an unfathomable depth. A wonderful expression of this truth comes from the German Dominican Johann Tauler (*c.* 1300–1361); he also describes how someone can occasionally become aware of this deepest relationship—something that, in today's terms, we would call a 'mystical' experience.

> The soul has a hidden abyss, untouched by time and space, which is far superior to anything that gives life and movement to the body. Into this noble and wondrous ground, this secret realm, there descends that bliss of which we have spoken. Here the soul has its eternal abode. Here a man becomes so still and essential, so single-minded and withdrawn, so raised up in purity, and more and more removed from all things, for God himself is present in this noble realm, and works and reigns and dwells therein. This state of the soul cannot be compared to what it has been before, for now it is granted to share in the divine life itself. The spirit meets wholly with God and enflames itself in all things, and is drawn to the hot fire of love, which is God in essence and in nature.[5]

The history of Christian spirituality teaches us in all this is that whenever one of these dimensions—the body, the 'soul' (the powers of reasoning, feeling, and so on) and the 'spirit' (that depth of relationship, the mystery of being human)—is not valued as it should be, a spirituality lacks strength. Any meeting with God must always involve the whole person.

A True Encounter

The third element that the history of Christian spirituality offers concerns the reality of the *encounter* between God and the human being. Again this is not obvious. There have been periods in the history of Christendom when the reality of God (as God) and the reality of the human have undoubtedly been evaluated rightly but when, nevertheless, God remained at a great distance in the faith experience.

A good example is to be found in Peter Abelard (*c.* 1079–1142/1144), the thirteenth-century theologian. For Abelard, God was unapproachably distant, and he directed his theological reflection towards rational problems

[5] Johannes Tauler, *Sermons*, translated by Maria Shrady (New York: Paulist, 1985), 89–90.

connected with the Trinity. This remained for him something abstract and completely outside history. Many centuries later the consequences of this approach appeared in so-called 'deism': the conviction that, while God had created the world, the latter had remained autonomous ever since, just as when a clock-maker made a timepiece which then continues to function without requiring the maker's intervention.

Such a way of thinking was often represented in Christian art, especially by painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whenever the Father or the Trinity was shown, this was usually very far from any human reality, sitting in the highest heaven upon clouds that separate them from any human being. The humans appear in the foreground, and it is understandable that they do so because, since God is so far away, quite naturally attention turns mainly to those who have a concrete presence: men and women. Clearly in such a perspective there is no real encounter between the human and God. And, as a consequence, such a spirituality also proved to be unfruitful.

The Holy Trinity, ***by Corrado Gianquinto, 1754***

But there is another trend which also leads to the disappearance of any real meeting, and it is just the opposite. This supposes that the encounter between the human and God has to be understood as if the human is taken up into God, like a drop of water in the ocean. The human reality thus disappears in the divine All. In this case, the meaning of human culture and civilisation is

lost, and so it becomes quite futile to labour for a just human society. Of course, as one might expect, the Christian community met such trends with great suspicion. Quietistic spiritualities have often been forbidden to spread, even though, from the historical point of view, their condemnation was not always justified. In the discussion that the papal theological commission held to examine the work of Meister Eckhart (around the year 1328), one can see, reading between the lines, that the commission suspected that some passages in Eckhart pointed in that direction. The heart of the matter is that such an outlook must leave Christians dissatisfied, and in fact it proved to be unproductive and of little use culturally. The faithful had the intuition that a real encounter is richer than the disappearance of the one in the other.

History is teaching us here that a spirituality which *truly* appreciates this encounter is one that possesses strength and life. A remarkable example of this is found in the 'rediscovery' of the biblical Song of Songs by both Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and William of St Thierry around 1127–1130. Earlier the Song of Songs had been read as a picture of the love between God (the bridegroom) and God's people (the bride), or as the love between Christ and the Church. Bernard and William, however, preferred to read the text as a spiritual allegory of the meeting between God and the unique human person. Such a reading proved to be extremely fruitful in the history of mystical literature. Countless authors took over and developed this approach in later centuries. It is easy to understand why: the beautiful and poetic biblical text recounts the erotic love between two lovers and this sexual metaphor permits the mystical reader to reflect further on the relationship between God and the human person. Thus a profound and radical unity can be envisaged which does not imply that the divine and the human disappear into one another. Clearly, whenever two human lovers experience the unity of sexual intercourse, one is not absorbed into the other. On the contrary their otherness is precisely the necessary condition for their union. In this case, otherness and unity are not opposed. And so, for Bernard and William, and for all the later generations that followed them in this, the Song of Songs provided an exceptionally beautiful metaphor with which to express the meeting between the divine and the human: it both evokes great intimacy and unity, and it makes clear that the human is not lost in the divine. Here there is no unbridgeable distance between God and us, nor any absorption of ourselves by God, but an intense, intimate meeting which respects the difference of both.

Monks at Prayer in a Cloister, ***by Eduard Biermann, 1834***

Implicit in all this lies a fundamental and real openness between God and the human. In fact, there is an age-old tradition based on such openness to the other. The very first word of the Rule of St Benedict is 'Listen!' This is a call to the monk to be completely open to God. It makes us recall those representations in Roman frescoes which show figures staring with wide-open eyes at the divine mysteries. Or one may think of monastic architecture, where the central space, the inner garden within the cloister, symbolizes the most profound openness to God. There are so many artistic and literary works that bear witness to a vision of the human in which the relationship with, and openness to, God are placed at the most fundamental level. Meeting with God is there no accidental or secondary affair but belongs to the very *being* of the human creature. One of the great masters of Christian mystical literature, John of Ruusbroec (1293–1381), writes about what is most fundamental in the human person: 'It is nothing but an eternal going out of ourselves with clear foresight, to an otherness towards which we are inclined, out of ourselves, as to our bliss. For we feel an eternal inclination for a being other than we are.[6]

[6] Jan van Ruusbroec, *Vanden blinkenden steen*, in *Opera omnia*, volume 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), ll. 515–518.

Actually, this is not surprising: the Christian understanding of God as a Trinity makes it quite clear. God is the creator of the 'being' of the human being; and that 'being' is constantly coming forth from God. But God's own self is in reality a relationship, a three/one-ness. The relational ground-structure of the human is thus a imprint of the same being-structure of the Creator.

The great humanist Desiderius Erasmus (*c.* 1469–1536) offers in his book *In Praise of Folly* the beautiful reflection that it is precisely owing to the human relational ground-structure that a person is fully happy when he or she becomes loving and loved, and the beloved lives more in the beloved other than in him- or herself:

> First consider how Plato imagined something of this sort when he wrote that 'the madness of lovers is the highest form of happiness'.[7] For anyone who loves intensely lives not in himself but in the object of his love, and the further he can move out of himself into his love, the happier he is .... The more perfect the love, the greater the madness—and the happier. What, then, will life in heaven be like, to which all pious minds so eagerly aspire? .... The spirit will be in a marvellous manner taken by the supreme Mind, which is more powerful than its infinite parts. And so when the whole man will be outside of himself, and be happy for no reason except that he is out of himself, he will enjoy some ineffable share in the supreme good which draws everything into itself .... The pious occasionally have a foretaste of the reward to come. It is only the tiniest drop in comparison with the fount of eternal bliss, yet it far exceeds all pleasures of the body, even if all mortal delights were rolled into one.[8]

An encounter with the other gives us so much pleasure precisely because we are beings who have a real openness to the other. The greater the difference of the other, so much the greater is the wonder and the happiness of the encounter. And God is obviously the Other in the strongest possible sense of the word.

Some mention can be made at this point of a problem that has often been raised in the history of Christian spirituality: does this encounter between the divine and the human take place directly (without mediation) or indirectly (in a mediated way)? Once again it is John of Ruusbroec who provides a clear answer: 'Now understand: God comes without cease

[7] *Phaedrus*, 245B.

[8] Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Martin Dorp 1515*, translated by Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 206–207 (slightly modified).

within us, with intermediary and without intermediary, and demands of us enjoyment and activity, and that the one should not be hindered by the other but rather fortified'.[9] In so far as God's creative presence is on the level of the 'being' of the human then such an immediate presence is in no way opposed to God's mediated presence via creatures. While a clear distinction between the two forms of presence exists, there is no need to suppose that the one impedes the other.

The immediate presence of God is of a quite different sort from God's presence via creatures. Many spiritual authors speak in this regard of a mutual 'indwelling' of God and the human. The images they use to explain this are the light in the air, or the iron in the fire. It is evident that, for a correct understanding of this indwelling, one must not conceive of the human person and God as comparable entities, situated at the same level where the one stands in opposition to the other, or the one might reduce the other, such as light and darkness. But the presence of light by no means reduces the reality of the air, and the heat of the fire does not affect the reality of the iron. Air and light are of a different order and should in no way be considered competitors; the essential character of the iron is not transformed as a result of being put in the fire. In the same way, the human person remains entirely a human person despite dwelling entirely in God.

This overview, adopted by so many Christian writers, has the advantage that it provides a necessary correction to an incorrect understanding of the relationship between God and the human which is quite prevalent—for example, in the work of the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet.[10] In his view, religion can develop in two directions. The first (typified by Christianity, in Gauchet's opinion) is according to the idea of two realities—God and the human person—that are distinguishable, developing into a relationship of exclusion. This is a dualistic conception. The other (typified by eastern religions, in Gauchet's opinion) develops in the direction of the idea of fusion, a relationship of inclusion. According to Gauchet and others, this leads Christianity to a profoundly dualistic vision. The reality of God and that of the human person are radically different and detached, and the world of the human person is increasingly

[9] Jan van Ruusbroec, *Die geestelike brulocht*, in *Opera omnia*, volume 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), ll. b2244–b2247.

[10] Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, translated by Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

experienced as an autonomous reality. The 'exodus from religion' then begins. For many spiritual authors, however, the crucial element is that the relationship of the human person and God should be understood as a *loving encounter*. Love is neither fusion nor duality. On the contrary, love fosters the otherness of the other while, at the same time, it entails the possibility of a profound unity—which, of course, does not imply identity. An analysis such as that of Gauchet appears entirely to overlook this possibility.

Here what we learn from the history of Christian spirituality is that the proper evaluation of this real relational character and of the encounter between God and the human person has been exceptionally fruitful—for literature, culture, art and liturgy. Christian culture has flourished much less when either an unbridgeable gap between the divine and the human, or their fusion, has been emphasized.

A Foundation for Christian Humanism

Finally, it is good to point out that, from a historical perspective, it was this current that was the source of Christian humanism, appearing from the fifteenth century in the context of the *Devotio moderna*. The prince of the humanists, Erasmus, received his initial formation with the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer and then in 's-Hertogenbosch. They gave him the taste for an intellectual existence that was not lifeless (such as he saw among the nominalist theologians of his time), but nourished by a genuine encounter of the human and the divine. Such a life is of the greatest value for humanity because the human being is a *person*, which means a unique relationship, one indeed with the other. This relationship is what makes a person who he or she is. Consequently, a person is also at the deepest level a mystery and can never be 'finished' or 'completed'. It is in the groundless relationship that the person's unassailable worth resides.

A person is ... at the deepest level a mystery

Admittedly there is another trend, which also has its roots in the Middle Ages and which developed in early modern times. This sees the human being as essentially an *individual*. The very word, *in-dividuum*, denotes a solitary oneness enclosed upon itself. For the individual, any relations are secondary additions, which do not belong to his or her *being*. It then becomes very easy for such an individual to become a replaceable cog in any socio-economic machine. History teaches us that totalitarian political systems have always preferred this individualistic

concept of the human. Consideration of the history of Christian spirituality can act as a defence against this trend.

Rob Faesen is a professor in the faculty of theology and religious studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium, holder of the Jesuitica Chair, and a member of the Ruusbroec Society at the University of Antwerp. He is also a professor at Tilburg University, where he is holder of the Francis Xavier Chair. His research focuses on the history of Middle Dutch mystical literature. He is a member of the research unit History of Church and Theology.

translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ