# INITIATION INTO SPIRITUAL CLASSICS

By IAN BREWARD

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN A COURSE introducing a selection of spiritual classics to Presbyterian ordinands in the 1960s, I found it very hard to find resources or models for such a course. My own reading was limited, and I had no formal training in the area apart from having read extensively in English Puritan writers during my doctoral course. A number of my students were uncomfortable with the Evangelical spirituality in which they had been nurtured, for they saw its limits, but they did not know what to put in its place. So it seemed natural to get them reading in a wide range of classic and contemporary books, so that they could make some personal choices, and also be able to direct their parishioners to suitable resources. I had met a number of people in my brief ministry who had experiences of a mystical type, but who did not know what to do with them. Charismatic renewal was just beginning to make an impact. It raised important issues about ways in which claims to have met God very directly were to be assessed. So did reunion negotiations and academic partnership with the national Catholic diocesan seminary.

Thirty years later, the situation has changed dramatically. A rich range of printed resources is now available, covering not only Christian, but also Jewish and Muslim classics. A number of spirituality networks have emerged, deliberately ecumenical in their approach. Religious orders have opened their houses to interested enquirers and a great variety of courses is available. Confessional boundaries have been drastically modified, and I now teach the history of Christian spirituality along with a variety of Roman Catholic and Protestant colleagues in the United Faculty of Theology, where Dr Noel Ryan SJ pioneered an ecumenical course in the 1970s.

Spirituality is a rich word, which has grown in popularity over the last three decades. I understand it to mean how individuals and communities describe communion with God and explain the implications for ecclesial and social life. A course on the classics of spirituality must therefore range quite widely, so that students are opened to the variety of ways by which Christians have sought unity with God and

one another. They also need to be introduced to the subtle and complex interactions between spiritualities and their historical contexts. Such courses could easily be a kind of tourism which adds new images to the traveller, but does little to change the way in which the world is perceived.

There are problems with assessment which have become more clear over the years. Writing essays and reviews can give a teacher some insight into students' intellectual understanding of spiritual classics, but it is much more difficult to assess whether students' relationship to God has deepened, or if their practice of prayer has altered. In a seminary or theological college with strong pastoral relationships between staff and students, such assessment would not be seen as intrusive, but there are more delicate issues which arise when such courses are taught in the context of a university with no declared religious position. Teaching with Jesuits has underlined just how important the role of director can be in developing spiritual discernment and maturity. Does confining a course to reading and academic discussion foster individualism and a detached approach which leaves out issues of performance altogether, in a way which would never be countenanced, for instance, in the teaching of music?

Some of these issues will arise in an indirect way if a wide range of classics is prescribed, but historical study cannot have the predictable outcomes which are currently revered by educational administrators. Students can be challenged, but they need to be able to proceed at their own pace, using the best insights of historical study and literary criticism to help in their task of interpretation. They will become aware of the ways in which psychology and language shape spirituality and the discernment that is central to every discipline. Introduction to political, intellectual and social contexts will put classics in appropriate settings. Teachers need to alert students to their own commitments and limitations, so that students also can become more aware of their own cultural and religious position.

It can be a demanding task for a student with no experience of vowed religious life in community to translate writings from that environment into the world of commuting, family pressures and the demands of a job or the vacuum created by unemployment. For some Protestant students, Orthodox and Roman Catholic spiritualities can initially look more like hostile territory than a familiar homeland. A Pentecostal student convinced that speaking in tongues is an infallible sign of true Christianity will find it hard to take writings from other traditions seriously when they lack this touchstone.

Another set of problems is created by the pluralism of modern society and the thin knowledge many students have of the Bible or of their own Christian tradition. They may be captivated by classics from another tradition, without giving any attention to undiscovered elements in their own denomination, for personal and corporate memory is often too short, or too sharply focused to be catholic. Teaching spiritual classics offers a challenge surprisingly like that faced by leaders in the early Church, who could take little for granted in their congregations. Often they had to cope with assumptions which were hostile to central Christian convictions. Teachers must pay attention to what is present and absent in the religious worlds of their students.

Introduction to historical methods of understanding other eras and cultures is essential to understanding spiritual classics. Students can find it very unsettling to apply critical-historical methods to matters of prayer and communion with God. Such methods appear to desacralize and diminish the holy, reducing it to what is common and everyday, especially when students begin to see the subtleties of power and social construction in religious matters. The historical study of varied spiritualities can initially seem relativist, for previous views on revelation are challenged by historians' use of social sciences. It is only when students move past the stage of disillusionment to a deeper insight into the relationship between revelation and its discernment in the context of daily experience, that they begin to see that the historical nature of Christianity is one of its most distinctive features. It can also be liberating to study other approaches to Christianity, for that is not so threatening as critical examination of one's own immediate tradition. Understanding the peculiarities of Christian language in theology and spirituality can also interact powerfully with the assumptions of our quasi-scientific culture. Learning about the limitations of all language about God, its metaphorical and analogical nature, can help people come to terms with the complexity and simplicity of writing on spirituality, especially when there are philosophical and theological assumptions which need clarification before an author's intention can be clarified.

If God is conceived as a transcendent deity, with whom relationship is only possible by faith, because it is held that the difference between divinity and humanity has only been bridged by Jesus, then a kind of spirituality will emerge that is different from that where some kind of human deification is assumed, because there is understood to be a spark of divinity in every human heart. A theologically educated spiritual writer may use much more complex language about his or her spirituality than someone with almost no formal education but with a rich

experience and deep knowledge of the Bible. There are many significant differences between the writings of Meister Eckhart and John Bunyan, but a careful historical reading of their works can bring out some illuminating comparisons.

Students engaged in reading spiritual classics can be at very different stages of personal development, so that introducing them to a wide range of writers is very important. Those preparing for ordination may see as important different issues from those who simply wish to equip themselves for more intelligent discipleship. Introduction to a resource bank of historic spirituality can do much to widen horizons about Christianity and foster a more discerning insight into the strengths and weaknesses of modern spiritualities. More is involved than introducing people to a supermarket where the best-selling lines are temptingly placed for easy access. Equipping students with basic principles for the exercise of judgement is one of the most important parts of an adequate course. They need to learn to look past what is superficially attractive to the enduring values of older spiritualities. They need to have the maturity and curiosity to explore what is culturally unfamiliar with patience and empathy. The teacher in such a course acts as an adviser, helping people to see what is appropriate, but also challenging them to read some of the monographs which contribute to the interpretation of writings from previous centuries. The monographs enable the text to be heard on their own terms, not just seized on because they seem startlingly relevant.

Historical study which enables students to enter the world of another era or culture has some interesting parallels with the authentic performance of music, using period instruments. The resulting sound can be quite different from what we usually hear. Introducing students to individuals for whom past spiritualities are the living present in their religious order or faith community can be an invaluable adjunct to reading and reflection, however sensitively undertaken. Orthodox spirituality as set out in writings from the *Philokalia* demands spiritual guidance and the living encounter of novice and mentor. Meeting Bishop Anthony Bloom quite transformed my views of Orthodoxy, neatly turning upside down some of my most cherished convictions. Historical reading on its own might never have done this; a course on reading spiritual classics needs to include the reading of commentaries that reflect personal commitment and that remind students that at its best the study of classics is life-changing. Courses in the United Faculty of Theology are not yet at the stage where we can offer an appropriate mix of introductory and advanced work which can take

people deeper into what is already familiar. Some people involved in spiritual direction have recently made proposals for a course on spiritual discernment which would meet their needs for much more searching reflection, and help them to translate the insights of past spiritual guides into their present ministry.

Reading texts involves dialogue between writer and reader. Over the years, student responses have suggested that some of the most readily accessible parts of spiritual classics can lead to a premature conviction that the text has been understood, without adequate attention being paid to historical context and the cultural gap between past and present. When texts are translated, students can be a little more ready to deal with that gap, but when they read writers whose native tongue is English the gap can be too readily bridged, even when several centuries are involved. Developing sensitivities to unspoken assumptions and nuances which are not immediately obvious can make the reading of texts seem formidable, especially if people have been accustomed to spiritual reading that is not demanding and that is attractively packaged for modern readers. Students sometimes need to be helped to see that the parts which they find repugnant or irrelevant or boring may in fact offer the most vital clues to meaning in another culture's spirituality.

Learning how to read so that the writer addresses one can take time, and some instruction in the art of meditation may be needed before students can read between the lines, savour meaning and start to understand that mere quantity of reading may be an obstacle to real understanding. That kind of detailed historical reflection can be very hard to achieve within the confines of a semester and the pressures to produce assignments. Leisurely reading can still be highly concentrated, but modern university courses increasingly discourage the spaciousness of awareness which is necessary to get the best from reading spiritual classics. The teacher's most important function may therefore be simply to make students aware of what is available and give them a sufficient taste for the genre to ensure that they will continue to read in this area for the rest of their days as disciples.

Religious communities have a different rhythm and can make possible a slower and more nourishing absorption of classical perspectives, especially when they are living out a particular kind of spirituality. The greatest weakness of courses in reading spiritual classics is that they do not make adequate connections with Christian living and the discipline of personal transformation. Important connections can occur in an academic course or, better still, in a professional course for ministry which sensitively integrates practice, reflection and structured reading

so as to encourage the integration of spirituality and discipleship. A historical approach is only one of several possibilities in reading spiritual classics. Theology, sociology, psychology, therapy and education can all provide equally valid ways into understanding this precious Christian resource bank, so that modern Christians can be encouraged to listen to the wisdom of other centuries and cultures.

When the subject is approached historically, some attention also needs to be given to the selection of classics on offer, so that a realistic number is chosen and the variety of different approaches adequately dealt with. A course must start with attention to the teaching of Jesus and the spirituality of the early Christian communities. The brevity of Jesus' teachings notwithstanding, there are important issues to be raised, not least his Jewishness and the foundations for his communion with God. The misunderstandings of his disciples and hearers are reminders that the search for truth does not necessarily follow a straight path. Jesus makes clear links between repentance and discipleship. His own crucifixion and resurrection offer stark reminders of the cost of communion with the Father and the ways in which politics and spirituality intersect. Few of his followers have managed to combine his wit and his visions of the end of human history.

The writers of the Gospels and Paul all demonstrate that from the beginning Christianity combined variety in spirituality with loyalty to Jesus the Risen One. The early Christian communities had neither books nor lecture rooms to shape their spirituality. The Holy Spirit in the churches guided them in the new way through a mix of worship, witness and service, not to mention the threat of persecution, one of the severest forms of assessment. The cultural gap between their world and ours must be carefully discussed, as must the similarities and differences between spiritual discernment and wisdom, on the one hand, and the assumptions and results of critical-historical method, on the other. The beginning of the course is also a helpful place for the lecturer to offer a frank picture of his or her spiritual journey and the bearings which have guided it.

The next stop for soundings is the ascetic and monastic movements in Syria, Egypt and other parts of the Roman Empire. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* and the Pachomian writings offer an admirable introduction to the strengths of individual and communal piety, but they need to be supplemented with some account of the spiritual convictions of the martyrs. Dying for one's faith is a very dramatic witness to one's ultimate values and a reminder that the easy tolerance of much popular Christianity is a long way from the intensity of the early Christians, so

vividly recounted in the translations of the many martyrologies now available. Study of these movements offers important perspectives on the role of women. The influence of Macrina on her brothers Basil and Gregory was quite remarkable and an integral part of the noble heritage of Basilian monasticism in the Eastern Churches.

Given the importance of base communities in Latin American Christianity, as well as the brief flirtation many Christians of the 1960s and 1970s had with forms of community life, study of the Rule of either Benedict or Augustine offers insight into the value of a rule for any Christian group which wishes to provide a framework for worship, work and spiritual development that is within the reach of any committed believer. Separation from the world can be achieved in various ways, but students of spirituality need to explore the place of asceticism in relation to possessions, sexuality and authority. Reading such classics brings to light the significance of relations between such deliberately constructed communities and the Church in times of great social dislocation. Medieval monastic spirituality made large contributions to reform of Church and state.

Another angle on these historical relationships can be studied in the lives of Francis and Clare of Assisi. While Francis wrote little himself, his followers soon remedied that, and students have ample choice of material through which to understand the spirituality of this remarkable Christian. *The little flowers*, for instance, fascinates even the most convinced Protestant, for Francis is so transparently sincere, so passionately eager to evangelize and so sensitive to creation that he speaks powerfully across the centuries to any who care about the gospel, the poor and the creation. The issue of his stigmata also offers an important chance to discuss the relation between spirituality and suffering, as well as the importance of poverty.

The writing of systematic theology in the late twentieth century often proceeds with little attention to spirituality. Study of medieval mystics and theologians raises challenging questions about theological method and the place of personal commitment, as well as offering opportunity to deal with the relation between philosophical assumptions and spirituality. The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius cannot be ignored. Study of either the Rhineland mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, or the English mystics of the same period, opens windows on these issues. Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich or *The cloud of unknowing* all offer classical insights into these relationships. Julian fascinates by her use of the image of God's motherhood. Each reminds us that there were a number of lay people

searching for a deeper knowledge of God. Writings from the Beguine communities or the Brethren of the Common Life can be a useful resource for the exploration of lay spirituality, for there were clearly a number asking for a modification of monastic spirituality. Francis, Dominic and others had contributed to this by the formation of third orders, but a dramatic new impetus to this process of adaptation was given by the Reformations of the sixteenth century.

These religious upheavals opened up inter-confessional conflicts, many elements of which still shape our Christianities. Several leaders had major influence on new forms of spirituality, which all had some features that were in continuity with what was already in place. Indeed, many historians see this turbulent century as a climax of the medieval impulses for reform. Erasmus wrote eloquently about Christ-centred piety and living, but his *Colloquies* are wittily subversive of the follies of traditional spiritualities which had gone sour. By contrast, Luther widened the meaning of vocation and priesthood by applying the terms to all Christians and the world of their daily work. He gave 'justification' a new meaning and insisted that it was gifted by faith alone, not by a judicious partnership between the believer and God. His 1520 book on Christian freedom is a remarkable testament to a spirituality based on freedom to love and receive love. He pulled religion out of the cloister into the family and market place. Rejection of celibacy led to a re-evaluation of sexuality and family life, the reverberations of which are still with us.

Clashes between his followers and those of Calvin should not obscure their shared debt to Paul and Augustine. Calvin's spirituality is a blend of classical ethics and biblical insight, shaped by his own deep experience of grace and divine sovereignty. Study of his path opens up important questions about the relation between his spirituality and the reform of urban life. Amongst his followers, obedience to God and sharing in revolutionary political activity left a deep imprint on European history. In France, Holland, Scotland and England Calvinist spirituality challenged every human institution in the name of God and contributed significantly to civil wars.

Reformed Catholicism in Spain and France also produced a rich literature and many classics. Teresa of Avila's autobiography and other writings underline how influential women could be. The haunting poetry of John of the Cross still speaks powerfully about the depth of spiritual struggle. The work of Ignatius Loyola is the most influential of all and the *Spiritual Exercises* indispensable reading for any course on spiritual classics. Its christocentric focus, its use of imagination and its

insistence on submission to the Church's authority make it a challenging text to read. Jesuit colleagues insist it can only be understood by a lifetime of directed retreats, but some very important issues emerge for its readers, even when they study it in an academic context.

An important spirituality for many English-speaking Protestants and their spiritual progeny in mission areas has been Evangelicalism. This has varied roots, the most important of which are in the Puritan movements of the seventeenth century, the Wesleyan revival and the influence of North American Protestantism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emergence of covenanted churches with membership based on a particular pattern of conversion and commitment to holiness has been very important for Anglo-Celtic Protestantism since the seventeenth century and persists in Baptist and Pentecostal churches to this day, as well as in various independent churches. There is a vast literature from the Puritan divines in seventeenth-century Britain, but the best introductions to the movement are to be found in Bunyan's *The pilgrim's progress*, the letters of Samuel Rutherford and the journal of George Fox, all of which are written in vigorous colloquial English.

A High Church spirituality emerged in the Church of England alongside Puritan emphases, often self-consciously opposed to what seemed the extravagances of conversionism. The classics are George Herbert's poetry and his prose work, *A priest to the temple*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and William Law's *A serious call*. The last was a formative influence on the Wesley brothers, who took up the existing pattern of societies that had been formed for moral and religious improvement, adding their own distinctive account of conversion and holiness and providing hymns which are universally loved. The place of music and hymnody in the Methodist meetings gave popular spirituality a major impetus among the religiously destitute in England, Ireland and the American colonies. Wesleyan spirituality offers insight into the place of ecstasy, the democratization of religious authority and the value of closely knit small groups meeting for prayer, study, service and mutual encouragement.

Wesley's followers left the Church of England, but a significant group committed to the same kind of ministry stayed and exercised a major influence on national life, as well as motivating a variety of mission work at home and abroad. In addition they had a large influence on the abolition of slavery. William Wilberforce's *A practical view* sets out the foundations of this lay spirituality, with its commitment to Bible reading, private prayer, mission and holiness. Despite the

criticisms urged against such spirituality, it has remained influential amongst significant groups of laity in the Commonwealth and North America. It has been one of the major sources of Pentecostal churches and charismatic renewal. The latter is well described in D. Bennett's *Nine o'clock in the morning*.

The nineteenth century saw a great flowering of new religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church. In Australia, study of the spirituality of the Josephites, founded by Blessed Mary MacKillop, provides a fine example of a spirituality committed to the poor and the education of their children. Mother Mary's letters are a treasury of spiritual insight and show the sources of the strength which enabled her successfully to resist the actions of several tyrannical bishops who did their best to destroy her work and vision. Anglo-Catholic spirituality has been a powerful influence in the Anglican Communion among both clergy and laity, and also in the religious orders which grew out of the conviction that the Catholic heritage could be a source of renewal. Among the best places to explore its spirituality are John Keble's *The Christian year* and the writings of the twentieth-century author, Evelyn Underhill.

Ecumenism has created a new context for spirituality in the twentieth century. Confessional traditions and distinctive ethnic emphases like black theology still provide important foci for identity, but all the great religious traditions have begun to look at their classics and the classics of others with fresh interest. There has been a remarkable convergence of spiritualities as a result, with searchers moving across once impassable barriers to draw refreshment from other traditions and then to blend them with their own. It is too early to pronounce confidently on twentieth-century classics, but writers like Merton, Nouwen, Bonhoeffer, Weil and Hammarskjöld are strong contenders and provide compelling insights into the spiritual authority needed to confront the forces of darkness. Helder Camara shows how vital the connection can be between classic spirituality and the needs of the poor and marginalized. There are many writings of twentieth-century martyrs which impressively expose the long struggle for religious freedom and the power to resist tyranny, prison, torture, exile and death which their lives exemplify. Sheila Cassidy's *Audacity to believe* is one of the most striking examples of this spirituality.

Study of spiritual classics now takes place in a very different context from that in which I began teaching. The presence in Australia of representatives of almost all the major Christian religious traditions makes such study very much a contemporary need, for without it older Australian migrant denominations will not understand the rich insights which new arrivals can offer.

Even more fascinating is the way in which study of Aboriginal spirituality has become politically very controversial. Australian Christians have, with a few exceptions, been almost totally dismissive of Aboriginal religion and its rich world of art, dance and mythology, so different at many points from European Christianity, especially with its secret teachings about sacred places and rites, which are known only to the very senior members of tribal communities. Australian governments are slowly giving some recognition to Aboriginal title to land and to sacred sites. A recent decision by the federal government to ban the building of a bridge to develop a resort on Hindmarsh Island in South Australia was based on a careful enquiry into the claim that it was a site especially sacred to women. The evidence was not divulged to any men, although an administrative bungle led to the documents finding their way to an Opposition front-bencher. He copied them. There was such a furore that he was forced to resign.

Very recently some women from the tribe concerned have claimed that the alleged secret material was fabricated with the help of a white Australian lawyer. An inquiry has been appointed by the federal government. The South Australian government has also set up an investigation of its own. The outcome will be watched with fascination, for many Aboriginal Christians are very strongly committed to the preservation of sacred sites. Other Australian Christians, conditioned by the idea that land is a saleable and exploitable resource, find this spirituality hard to understand, for their religious identity is not linked in the same specific way with place, or with a deep concern for care of the earth as Mother.

Anglo-Celtic and European Christians are being forcefully confronted with the gaps in their own spiritualities by articulate Aborigines. They have reminded their sisters and brothers of the close relation between spirituality and art, healing, law, ecology. They reject the pervasive acceptance of secularity which has deeply influenced all the Australian churches and they have pushed other Christians to reassess their own spiritual classics. We all have to face unsettling questions about the interrelation of revelation, experience of God and the filters and constraints created by history and culture. Dialogue with the spiritual classics will be a vital resource in this reassessment. Sensitive reading of our past will make some contribution to discernment of spiritual priorities for the twenty-first century, creating fresh connections between politics, religion and the never-ending search for a just and responsible society.