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WHEN IS SPIRITUALITY SPIRITUAL? REFLECTIONS ON SOME PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

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The current interest in spirituality is both salutary and frightening.

It is salutary because in its best forms it is infinitely to be preferred over the assumed philosophical materialism that governs many people, not only in the western world but in many other parts as well. It is salutary wherever it represents a self-conscious rebellion against the profound sense of unreality that afflicts many churches. We speak of "knowing" and "meeting with" and "worshiping" the living God, but many feel that the corporate exercises are perfunctory and inauthentic, and in their quietest moments they wonder what has gone wrong.

It is frightening because "spirituality" has become such an ill-defined, amorphous entity that it covers all kinds of phenomena an earlier generation of Christians, more given to robust thought than is the present generation, would have dismissed as error, or even as "paganism" or "heathenism."[1] Today "spirituality" is an applause-word—that is, the kind of word that is no sooner uttered than everyone breaks out in applause. In many circles it functions in the spiritual realm the way "apple pie" functions in the culinary realm: Who is bold enough to offer a caution, let alone a critique?

What is quite certain is that the topic currently generates enormous interest.

I. SOME CURRENT DEFINITIONS, EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT

Despite the contention of J. W. Conn that originally spirituality was "a christian term—from Paul's letters,"[2] it is nothing of the kind. True, "spirit" and "spiritual" are found in the NT, but very few writers on spirituality begin with inductive study of such terms in order to establish what "spirituality" means. As a term "spirituality" emerged from French Catholic thought, though for the last century or so it has been common in Protestantism as well. Earlier writers could speak of "the spiritual life" and mean something rather more narrowly defined than Paul meant by "the spiritual

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[1] Cf. the well-considered warnings against what he calls the "new spirituality"—various forms of new-age-related mysticism—issued by G. R. Lewis, "The Church and the New Spirituality," *JETS* 36 (1993) 433–444.

[2] J. W. Conn, "Spirituality," *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 972.

man" in 1 Corinthians 2, but it is this focus on "the spiritual life" that ultimately led to Christian coinage of the term "spirituality"

In fact in the history of the Christian Church until the Reformation there were many different elements connected with spiritual life, only a few of them achieving prominence at any time or place sacraments, community, prayer, asceticism, martyrdom, vows of poverty and/or celibacy, images, monasticism, and much more Increasingly, spiritual life came to be associated with the pursuit of perfection, so far as that is possible this side of the consummating *visio Dei* Thus it was not for all Christians It was for those who particularly panted after God Thus although spirituality (to use the term anachronistically) embraced all of life, it embraced all of life only for some believers By the beginning of the eighteenth century Giovanni Scaramelli (1687–1752) of the Society of Jesus, building on long-established traditions, sharply distinguished ascetic and mystical theology as the primary components of the study of spiritual life The former has to do with the exercises to which all Christians who aspire to perfection will devote themselves, while the latter deals with the extraordinary states of consciousness and their secondary manifestations during times of mystical union with God Thus "spirituality" became a discipline, "spiritual theology," to be distinguished from dogmatic theology, which tells us what must be believed, and from moral theology, which tells us how we must act These are the essential distinctions that govern the classic treatment by P Pourrat [3]

In his three-volume history Bouyer sought a more precise definition [4]

> Christian spirituality (or any other spirituality) is distinguished from dogma by the fact that, instead of studying or describing the objects of belief as it were in the abstract, it studies the reactions which these objects arouse in the religious consciousness But, rightly, it does not entertain the pseudo-scientific, and in fact wholly extravagant, prejudice that the understanding of the objects polarizing the religious consciousness is essentially foreign to an understanding of this consciousness itself On the contrary, spirituality studies this consciousness only in its living relationship with those objects, in its real apprehension of what it believes Dogmatic theology, therefore, must always be presupposed as the basis of spiritual theology, even though the latter concerns itself with the data of the former only under the relationship that they entertain with the religious consciousness

That last point, that spiritual theology presupposes dogmatic theology, a point emphasized by both Pourrat and Bouyer, is denied today by some authors,[5] who maintain the reverse Spirituality is what shapes our theology We must experience something before we proceed to articulate it in dogmatic forms Part of the difference between these two perspectives, one suspects, stems from the concern of the former to relate dogmatics to experience

[3] P Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality* 4 vols (Westminster, 1953–55) Cf also the important work by C Jones, G Wainwright and E Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality* (Oxford Oxford University 1986)

[4] L Bouyer *et al* , *History of Christian Spirituality*, 3 vols (London Burns and Oates, 1963–68) 1 viii

[5] E g R N Flew *The Idea of Perfection* (Oxford Oxford University, 1934), G Wainwright, *Doxology* (London Epworth, 1980)

in the experience of most individuals, and the concern of the latter to relate experience to dogmatics in the genesis and formation of a movement.

It is worth pausing to draw attention to several features that have already come to light.

1. *Catholicism (and Orthodoxy too, for that matter) has invested far more heavily in "spirituality" studies than has Protestantism*, owing in no small measure to the emphasis (until very recent times) on the pursuit of perfection (sometimes thought of as mystical union) by a subset of Christians, by "elite" Christians (though of course they would never think of themselves under such a term), not infrequently monastics. This traditional Catholic interest is still reflected in such details as, say, the relative amounts of space given to the subject in recent Catholic and evangelical dictionaries of theology,[6] or the number of books congregating around the theme of spirituality published by Paulist Press and by Zondervan or Eerdmans.

2. *At least since the eighteenth century "spirituality" could refer either to certain approaches to the knowledge of God (still being defined) or to the study of such approaches.*

3. *The parenthetical remark "or any other spirituality" (in the extended quote from Bouyer above) reflects another development that is harder to handle. In the context this refers to spirituality in non-Christian religions*: Hindu spirituality, Islamic spirituality, Buddhist spirituality, animist spirituality, and so forth. In the context of Bouyer's work—a study of the history of Christian spirituality, based for the most part on textual evidence—non-Christian spirituality may be an eminently useful category: It refers to something like the interplay between dogma and religious consciousness in non-Christian religions, based, once again, on textual (or other largely phenomenological) evidence. But is the related dogma true in each instance? Does it matter? Is the "spirituality" related to these mutually exclusive systems of dogma valid or true or useful or helpful when the dogma to which it is tied is not true? Are we dealing only with the mind, the stuff of human consciousness? Or if we are insisting that there is a transcendent dimension to spirituality, is that transcendent dimension the same for the Christian who believes the gospel and for the animist who is imploring the spirits for a fat baby? Do we adopt the position of the radical pluralists who assume that virtually every form of spirituality is as valid as any other form, and this in itself becomes a way of authenticating the relative truthfulness of all dogma? In that case, of course, one must say something fuzzy—for example, argue that although these systems of dogma transparently contradict one

[6] The article by J. W. Conn, already mentioned, takes up 14 pages out of 1106; the corresponding article by T. R. Albin in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1988) takes up less than two pages out of 738. One should also reckon with the substantial number of articles in the Catholic volume on related themes, most of which have no parallel in the Inter-Varsity volume.

another they all point equivalently to some greater system beyond the ken of any one of them. To such questions I shall briefly return.

This side of Vatican II, Catholic emphases on spirituality have been less associated with the pursuit of perfection by the elite than with growth in Christian experience by all Catholics. Thus the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church issued a universal call to holiness: "All the faithful of whatever rank . . . are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (L.G.40). The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy asserts that the primary goal of the entire Vatican II council is to intensify Christian spirituality, "the daily growth of Catholics in Christian living" (S.C.1). This is given as one of the reasons for making the liturgy, and especially the mass, more accessible (S.C.2). At the same time it can scarcely be denied that post-Vatican-II Catholicism has fostered a diversity of views on spirituality, many of which are less and less eucharistically centered. Now a great deal of attention is focused on feminist spirituality, the spirituality of a life of poverty or of social transformation, and so forth. A great deal of contemporary publication in the area of spirituality explores what are judged to be complementary dimensions: the philosophical, the psychological, the theological, the mystical, the social, and so forth. It is becoming exceedingly difficult to exclude anything—absolutely anything—from the purview of spirituality, provided that there is some sort of experiential component in the mix. In this environment the pursuit of such "spirituality" is far from being a merely Catholic interest.[7] In this light one of the most recent definitions of spirituality to appear in a Catholic publication is entirely coherent, even if so all-embracing as to be rather daunting:[8]

> The term spirituality refers to both a lived experience and an academic discipline. For Christians, it means one's entire life as understood, felt, imagined, and decided upon in relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit. It also indicates the interdisciplinary study of this religious experience, including the attempt to promote its mature development.

During the last century or so, "spirituality" has become part of the regular vocabulary of Protestants. Until the last few decades, when liberal Protestantism's conception of spirituality has gradually expanded to roughly the same dimensions as that within post-Vatican-II Catholicism, Protestantism's interest in spirituality has largely been that associated with godliness and the devotional life in traditional evangelicalism. Although "spirituality" was not a term in vogue among the English Puritans, for instance, it is hard not to appreciate their emphases on conformity to Christ, personal moral examination, confession of sin, meditation on the Word, full-hearted use of "the means of grace." William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*[9] is, within this tradition, a classic in spirituality. Much more recently, and from

[7] Cf e g *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (ed G S. Wakefield, Philadelphia Westminster, 1983)

[8] Conn, "Spirituality" 972

[9] Written in 1728

a slightly different doctrinal structure within the heritage of evangelicalism, Richard Foster and Richard Lovelace have issued somewhat similar calls.[10] Building on the Puritans, not a few of Packer's books are essentially works designed, at least in part, to nurture the spiritual life.[11]

This is the matrix, then, out of which so many books and articles on spirituality (whatever that word means) are now being produced. I have barely begun to mention the resources available. For example, there is a substantial literature on Orthodox spirituality. Perhaps one of the most accessible entry points to this heritage is a little book by an anonymous monk of the eastern Church.[12] A very remarkable book explores the patterns of life of several Catholic and Orthodox believers who are prepared to be "fools for Christ's sake."[13] The medieval emphasis linking voluntary poverty and perfection still finds its advocates.[14] The great boom in feminist spirituality is now calling forth, from within the presuppositions of that heritage, reflections on male spirituality.[15] For readers interested in the understanding of spirituality outside Christianity, perhaps one should start with Jewish spirituality.[16] The rage of the age is pluralism, or perhaps syncretism. Thus one recent book attempts to tie spirituality to western depth psychology, eastern meditation, Christian thought, and the author's own experience.[17] It takes a sociologist to advise us that baby boomers are attempting to define spirituality in a new way.[18] Another writer insists that the change from a typographic culture to an electronic culture "is altering our sense of ourselves and our definition of religious experience and spirituality" (I am getting nervous as I pound this out on my computer).[19]

Some of the problems are terminological. For instance, while evangelicals write not only technical commentaries on Biblical books but also "devotional" commentaries, Catholics write not only technical commentaries

[10] R J Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (2d ed , San Francisco Harper, 1978), R Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1979), *Revival as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1985)

[11] E g J I Packer, *Knowing God* (London Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), *A Quest for Godliness The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton Crossway, 1990)

[12] Anonymous, *Orthodox Spirituality An Outline of the Orthodox Ascetical and Mystical Tradition* (2d ed , London SPCK, 1978)

[13] J Saward, *Perfect Fools Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford Oxford University, 1980)

[14] E g M D Guinan, *Gospel Poverty Witness to the Risen Christ A Study in Biblical Spirituality* (New York Paulist, 1981)

[15] E g P Culbertson, *New Adam The Future of Male Spirituality* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1992)

[16] Cf *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages* (ed A Green, New York Crossroad, 1985), *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present* (ed A Green, New York Crossroad, 1988)

[17] D Evans, *Spirituality and Human Nature* (Albany State University of New York, 1993)

[18] W C Roof, *A Generation of Seekers The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco Harper, 1993)

[19] R Thieme, "Computer Applications for Spirituality The Transformation of Religious Experience," *ATR* 75 (1993) 345–358

but also "spiritual" commentaries.[20] Recently a Protestant has adopted a somewhat similar tack: Barton's book on the gospels is not interested in the "devotional" approach but on exploring the gospels to find out what they can tell us about "the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence."[21] He locates a great deal of the "spirituality" of the gospels—that is, the sense of the divine presence illustrated in or advocated by the gospels—in the spirituality of Jesus (i.e. in Jesus' own experience of the divine presence). There is much more of Jesus as example or prototype than of Jesus as Savior or Lord. The two themes do not have to be antithetical, but one of them is hardly heard in this book.

The discipline of the historical study of spirituality also continues apace, usually from a vantage point of strong advocacy. As compared with the earlier histories of Pourrat and Bouyer, these works tend to reflect much broader definitions (explicit or implicit) of spirituality, typical of the last three decades that have suffered from the driving impact of philosophical pluralism.[22] Thus in a book on Asian Christian spirituality the opening address by Samuel Rayan, a Jesuit theologian from India, proposes this definition for spirituality: "To be spiritual is to be ever more open and responseable to reality."[23] Another recent history of spirituality constantly stresses the importance of feminist spirituality and rejoices that Christian spirituality is plural (Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, whatever) and must become more culturally diverse, even while warning that "in this movement outwards, it is not helpful to be rootless or to wander aimlessly from one spiritual culture to another in search for somewhere to be at home. To enter fruitfully into the unfamiliar one needs a real sense of where one belongs."[24] A recent book on Reformed spirituality includes a breadth of perspectives that many believers in the Reformed tradition would find hard to recognize.[25] Even some recent important works on theology have been heavily influenced by contemporary trends in spirituality.[26] Evangelicals have

[20] E g L Doohan, *Luke The Perennial Spirituality* (Santa Fe Bear, 1982)—to cite but one example from scores of entries See in particular the Michael Glazier series on different Biblical books "for spiritual reading"

[21] S C Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (London SPCK, 1992)

[22] On which cf D A Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," *God and Culture* Festschrift *for Carl F H Henry* (ed D A Carson and J D Woodbridge, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1993) 31–66

[23] *Asian Christian Spirituality Reclaiming Traditions* (ed V Fabella, P K H Lee and D K Suh, Maryknoll Orbis, 1992) 22

[24] P Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York Crossroad, 1991), esp 210

[25] H L Rice, *Reformed Spirituality An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox, 1991)

[26] E g J Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life A Universal Affirmation* (London SCM, 1992) Part 1 deals with "Experiences of the Spirit," including a section on the spirituality of Jesus When Moltmann outlines a "theology of mystical experience," mystical means "the intensity of the experience of God in faith" One reviewer, though deeply appreciative, comments "The whole is passionate and impressionistic, authentic as a piece of literary art, and curiously unsatisfactory as a rational account of anything in particular" (G Newlands in *ExpTim* 104 [1993] 148) Of course some might judge this characteristic to be an advantage

plunged into this discussion.[27] One recent evangelical writer, after arguing that evangelicals who are ignorant of their own rich heritage of spirituality (he was thinking not least of the Puritans) are in danger of constantly borrowing the forms of other heritages,[28] rather strangely insists that the modern pace of life makes it "quite unrealistic" to present Christians with the demand to read the Bible and pray daily.[29] One wonders exactly what one is to learn from the historical highpoints of evangelical spirituality, which were very much rooted in the "spirituality of the word."

My concern, then, in this potted survey of spirituality is to bring to light the implicit and explicit definitions that the literature casts up. My survey has been neither deep nor broad, but perhaps it has cast up enough evidence for some useful reflection on the problems of definition.

II. REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT USE OF "SPIRITUALITY"

In what follows in this section I wish to articulate a number of inferences from the literature cited about the way "spirituality" as a term is used.

1. *Spirituality is a theological construct.* There is no way of getting direct access to what is good or bad about spirituality, or about any particular study of spirituality, by appealing to, say, Biblical texts that discuss spirituality because, so far as the term is concerned, none does.

Moreover it is not a theological construct whose constituent components are widely agreed on. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is also a theological construct. It may be believed or denied, articulated in a number of ways, set into the fabric of Christian theology and life in quite different arrays. But the substance of the doctrine, not least the array of its basic constituent theological parts, is not under dispute among informed confessional thinkers,[30] however warm and complex the dispute may be when it comes to precise and refined definition and defense of the details. To put the matter another way, however disputed the doctrine of the Trinity may be, all parties know what the dispute is about. By contrast, spirituality is a person-variable synthetic theological construct: One must always inquire as to what components enter into the particular construct advocated or assumed by a particular writer and what components are being left out. Only rarely are such matters made explicit. Readers are constantly trying to infer what theological underpinnings are presupposed.

[27] *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality.* Festschrift *for James Houston* (ed. J. I. Packer and L. Wilkinson; Downers Grove: 1992).

[28] A. E. McGrath, *Evangelical Spirituality: Past Glories, Present Hopes, Future Possibilities* (London: St. Antholin's Lectureship Charity Trustees, 1993); "Borrowed Spiritualities," *Christianity Today* 37/13 (November 8, 1993) 20–21.

[29] McGrath, *Evangelical* 13.

[30] I add "informed" because I wish to rule out massively *mis*informed caricatures of the doctrine of the Trinity, such as the one held by a fair bit of street-level Islam—namely, that the doctrine teaches God is made up of three persons, Father, Mary, and Jesus (the first impregnating the second to produce the third).

2. *Because mutually contradictory theologies may undergird these person-variable definitions of spirituality, the degree of real commonality among those working on the topic may be minimal.* For example, the Annand Center for Spiritual Growth at the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University, according to its brochure, has on its board strong syncretists, liberal Protestants, Catholics, and a Hindu spiritual master in the Vedic tradition.[31] Its teachers include local Episcopalian charismatics. The fact remains that the different understandings of spirituality represented by different world religions need careful delineation.[32] The sheer diversity of the implicit theological structures means that the meaning of "spirituality" degenerates into something amorphous like "an experience of the numinous," in which everyone loads "numinous" with that which is right in his or her own eyes. It is presupposed that such experiences of the numinous are a good thing, whatever the numinous consists in. Suddenly spirituality becomes something of a Trojan horse that introduces the most radical religious pluralism into what is nominally a Christian enterprise.

From a Christian perspective, worship is not only a verb, as Robert Webber likes to remind us,[33] but a transitive verb, and the most important thing about it is its direct object. We worship God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and all other worship is in some measure idolatrous, however much the gifts of common grace have preserved within such alien worship some insight into spiritual realities. To put the matter another way: Not every experience of the numinous, whether understood psychologically and/or as some engagement with the spiritual world, can be properly considered a "spiritual" experience in any NT sense. In short, not all spirituality is spiritual.

3. *Spirituality may devolve into a technique.* By the application of certain disciplines—study, fasting, prayer, self-denial, whatever—one seeks a more intimate experience of the numinous, however the numinous be understood. The two questions that must then be asked are these: (1) To what extent are such techniques value-neutral? (2) To what extent are they transportable?

These are not easy questions about which to give generalizing answers, though it is fairly easy to think up examples that illustrate quite different problems. Consider four examples.

First, part of spirituality (in this sense of technique and discipline) for the educated Hindu will be the careful reading of the *Vedas* and other Hindu scriptures. How well can that be transported to, say, evangelical Christianity? Is not the actual reading of sacred texts, or texts perceived to be sacred, value-neutral?

[31] Viz. Pundat Ravi Shankar—though I am told he is no longer on the board. I am grateful to the Rev. J. Ashley Null for bringing this particular instance to my attention.

[32] For an attempt to sort out Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim understandings of spirituality cf. the relevant chapters of *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1990).

[33] R. E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Waco: Word, 1987).

As a Christian I would respond by saying that at one level the Hindu example can be transported to Christianity fairly well. Of course what is read is different: Our Scriptures are not their scriptures. Nevertheless we would surely want to tie Christian spirituality to the thoughtful reading of the Bible. So I suppose it could be said that this practice, this technique, is transportable. But what, exactly, is being transported? If it is something like "the reading of texts perceived to be sacred," then although the practice is transportable it is not value-neutral. For there are many texts that are perceived to be sacred that are not, from my perspective, anything of the kind—including the *Book of Mormon* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. I deny, therefore, that the reading of texts perceived to be sacred is inherently a good thing. I deny that the act is value-neutral. It is merely the mechanical art of reading that is value-neutral—which is surely not saying very much.

Second, suppose I turn to the breathing and concentration exercises connected with *yoga*. How well can they be transported to Christianity? And are they value-neutral?

At one level, surely the breathing exercises are intrinsically value-neutral: One learns a slightly different set in preparation for natural childbirth. But the association of certain breathing exercises with concentration on a black dot on an expanse of white, coupled with the chanting of mantras in order to achieve a state of dissociation associated with achieving a higher state of "spirituality," is something else. How much of that is transportable to Christianity? Not very much—certainly not the chanting of mantras, still less the kind of meditation that is characterized by concentration on a spot on a blank expanse. I suppose certain breathing and relaxation exercises that help some uptight people to relax are unobjectionable. And if the purpose of such relaxation were to enable the person to concentrate in meditation and prayer on the Bible, I suppose this could be labeled part of a technique for growing in Christian spirituality. But it is getting pretty far removed: It is more like a technique in preparation for the discipline that could then genuinely be labeled Christian rather than an exercise in "spirituality" *per se*.

Third, consider the Lord's supper, holy communion. Is participation by a genuine Christian always a good thing? Surely if any spiritual discipline is not value-neutral, this is it, is it not? But is it transportable?

Once again the answers are not as simple as one might like. Surely nothing of significance here is transportable. True, some other religions have rituals of eating, but all of the associations connected with the Lord's table are quite radically unlike the eating rituals of other religions. The naked act of eating may be value-neutral, but the Lord's table is not a naked act of eating.

Nor is participation, even by genuine believers, always a good thing. For many of the problems in the Corinthian church Paul has a sort of "Yes, but" answer: "Yes, it is good for a man not to touch a woman, but since there is so much immorality each man should have his own wife" (1 Cor 7:1–2); "Yes, an idol is nothing at all in the world, but not everyone knows this" (8:4, 7); and so on. But with respect to the Lord's table Paul writes: "In the

following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good" (11:17). This is not, it transpires, because the celebration of the Lord's supper becomes an intrinsically evil act but because relationships within the congregation are selfish and thoughtless, and the sin is both unconfessed and unrecognized. So here we have a spiritual discipline that is not value-neutral (it is surely intrinsically good), not transportable, but can become thoroughly bad, not on intrinsic grounds but because of sins in the congregation.

Finally, what about various vows of self-denial practiced by medieval monastics? Can they be transported? Are they value-free, so that they can be detached from medieval Catholicism?

Certainly our generation could do with some self-discipline. We remember, say, Paul's determination in 9:24–27, and we are ashamed of our sloth and indolence. But vows of chastity are not something that a married believer should undertake, unless it is in agreement with one's spouse for a strictly limited period and in order to set aside time for prayer (7:5). A vow of chastity undertaken by a celibate person might be a good thing, but not if it is merely a frustrating attempt to suppress lust (7:9). Vows of poverty or relative poverty might be entirely salutary in this hedonistic and profligate age, but they might also prompt pride or foster merit theology. What about vows of silence? Some quiet in our noisy, self-expressive age would surely be a good thing. But how easily can, say, the Trappist vows of silence undertaken by Thomas Merton be disassociated from his deepening devotion to Mary as the "mother of God"? How about self-flagellation? Can it have any place whatever in a system of thought that has truly grasped the freedom of the grace of God provided in the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ? How intrinsically is it tied to medieval notions of elitist perfectionism not open to ordinary Christians?

In short, one cannot assume approaches to spirituality that are little more than discussions of technique, as if there were no hidden shoals to avoid.

III. SOME PRIORITIES FOR CHRISTIANS

I write out of evangelical convictions. The following brief points frankly reflect those commitments, though of course I cannot here defend them. Moreover the few points I make are rather more in the nature of priming the pump than of magisterial articulation. Almost every item could do with a lengthy chapter.

My fear is that many charismatics and, increasingly, many noncharismatic evangelicals, having emerged from the shadows of a fairly narrow and parochial heritage into the broader streams of Church history, are in danger of overcompensating and taking on board almost anything, provided it falls under the rubric of "spirituality." Yet at the same time there is much to learn about spiritual life, as about theology, from many of those with whom we disagree. If spirituality, with all its intellectual fuzziness, is not to become the new *summum bonum* by which all things are to be tested but must itself be brought to the test of holy Scripture, what priorities can help us preserve a healthy perspective without retreating into entrenched traditionalism?

1. *Spirituality must be thought of in connection with the gospel.* There may be some heuristic and historical value in conceiving of spirituality in purely neutral terms (the experience of the numinous, the study of such experience, or the like). But from a confessional, Christian perspective it is worse than useless. It is dangerous. To put matters bluntly, if the gospel is true, what will be the value, fifty billion years from now, of spending time in this life meditating on a black spot on a white expanse while chanting mantras?[34] Questions as to the nature of spirituality, the purpose of the putative experience of the transcendent, the nature of the God who is the ultimate source of the experience, the locus of the revelation he has given of himself, and the techniques and forms by which we may ostensibly know him better, must be brought to the test of the gospel. For it is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation; it is by faith in God's Son that we know the Father; it is by the cross and resurrection that we who were alienated from God have been reconciled to our Maker, Judge and Redeemer.

2. *Christian reflection on spirituality must work outward from the center.* During the past twenty years or so there has been a quite frightening tendency to assume the center without really being able to articulate much about it, and then to gravitate to the periphery. Indeed the tendency has been to focus on some element on the periphery, which then attracts our passion, interest and time. It is not that Christians should avoid thinking through the changing agendas on the periphery. We must. But if all our time and passion are devoted to abortion, styles of worship, women's ordination, church government, counseling techniques, the latest sociology report, or the best advertised marriage seminar, largely detached from the core of Biblical theology, then sooner or later the periphery is in danger of displacing the core—at least in our affections and energy, and perhaps in our theology (or that of our children).

So it is with spirituality. If spirituality becomes an end in itself, detached from the core and largely without Biblical or theological norms to define it and anchor it in the objective gospel, then pursuit of spirituality, however nebulously defined, will degenerate into nothing more than the pursuit of certain kinds of experience.[35] I must reiterate that I am not for that reason writing off all pursuit of all forms of spirituality. I shall say more about that in my next point. But spirituality must be thought about and sought after out of the matrix of core Biblical theology.

3. *At the same time we should be rightly suspicious of forms of theology that place all the emphasis on coherent systems of thought that demand faith,*

[34] I am sure my friends who are devoted to syncretism and philosophical pluralism will be suitably aghast at this point and dismiss my stance as ignorant hubris. In current literature, however, there is more hubris (not to mention cultural bias) attached to the absolute proposition that no religion *can* take precedence over another in its claims to truth. I have tried to wrestle with some of these matters in "Christian Witness," cited in n. 22, and hope to do so at greater length in *Christianity and Pluralism* (forthcoming).

[35] It is at this juncture that I sometimes have misgivings about some of the priorities of H. J. M. Nouwen—from whom, nevertheless, there is much to be learned. Cf. e.g. his *Life of the*

allegiance and obedience but do not engage the affections, let alone foster an active sense of the presence of God. If the kingdom of God has to do with "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:18), we must not reduce it to righteousness and systems of thought. The Spirit whom Jesus bequeathed to his followers is the Spirit announced as part of the newness of the new covenant (Ezekiel 36/John 3; Joel 2/Acts 2): He not only convicts the world (John 16) but also lives in believers (Rom 8:9), leading them (8:14) and testifying with their spirit that they are God's children (8:16).

This is not at all to suggest that the experience of the presence of the transcendent/personal God of the Bible should ever be considered as something entirely apart from holy living, self-discipline, love for others, solemn and enthusiastic praise, hatred of sin, conformity to Christ, ongoing confession and repentance, growth in understanding God's Word, and more. It is to say that there is a certain kind of evangelicalism that tries to think of holy living, self-discipline, love for others, solemn and enthusiastic praise, hatred of sin, conformity to Christ, ongoing confession and repentance, growth in understanding God's Word, and more, as discrete factors divorced from any experience of the Spirit. The Spirit becomes a creedal item and nothing more. Sometimes this stance is simply an overreaction to the obvious excesses of the charismatic movement. But whatever its cause it stands against both Scripture and the entire heritage of the best of Christianity where men and women, by God's grace, know God. True, that knowledge of God, mediated by the Spirit, is concomitant with the things I have just listed, and more besides. But it is real knowledge of the living God, not a mere mental image (like a mental image of, say, Peter Pan) that serves no real purpose other than to order the system of thought we call theology.

Certainly in times of revival (I use the term in its historic sense, not in one or more of its modern, degenerate senses), but at other times as well, Christians have known the presence of God so powerfully that they walk before him with a holy reverence and a genuine, persistent acknowledgment of his majesty and grace that is life-transforming. If the knowledge of the true God and of his Son Jesus Christ whom he has sent means eternal life (John 17:3), we must examine very carefully what the knowledge of God really is and embrace it wholly. If such life-transforming knowledge of God lies at the focus of what is meant by "spirituality," which then stands over against a merely traditional adherence to a creed no matter how orthodox, then let us stress spirituality.

4. *Nevertheless, what God uses to foster this kind of gospel spirituality must be carefully delineated.* Only God himself gives life. It is God who discloses himself, not only in the great acts of redemptive history but also by his Spirit to "natural" men and women (1 Cor 2:14) who do not have the

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Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World (New York Crossroad, 1993) His popularity across almost all confessional lines is, I think, possible precisely because his attractive emphasis on spirituality is not very well anchored in the gospel

Spirit of God and cannot understand the things of God. He reveals himself to Christians who mature and take on board a Biblical view of things (Phil 3:15). But normally God uses means. What are they?

It is precisely at this point that evangelicals need to reclaim their heritage. People speak of the spirituality of sacraments, or the spirituality of poverty, or the spirituality of silence. It is true that God may become very real to his people in the context of poverty. It is true that the corporate celebration of the Lord's supper may be a time of self-examination, confession, forgiveness, joy in the Holy Spirit. There are many means of grace. But perhaps the most important means of grace, certainly the means of grace almost entirely unmentioned in current publication on spirituality, is the Word of God.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17)—and there will never be much sanctification apart from the word of truth. It is the entrance of God's Word that brings light. It is constant meditation on God's law that distinguishes the wise from the unwise, the just from the unjust (Psalm 1). I do not deny that certain kinds of Bible study can be singularly arid, skeptical, merely formal, just as certain approaches to the Lord's table may do more harm than good (1 Cor 11:17 ff.). But the heavy stress in Scripture on understanding, absorbing, meditating upon, proclaiming, memorizing ("hiding it in one's heart"), reading, and hearing the word of God is so striking that it will be ignored at our peril. That is why the best of the evangelical heritage has always emphasized what might be called the spirituality of the Word.

It is within this framework that other "techniques," rightly deployed, may be of some value. If self-denial is merely an attempt to commend ourselves to God, or a way of feeling good about oneself (which feeling we then mistake for being spiritual), it is positively dangerous. But if self-denial is part of our response of gratitude and faith to the God who has manifested the greatest self-denial of all in the death of his Son, and if it thus aids our concentration on his Word, our obedience of it and our delight in it, then it is surely a good thing that will foster spiritual growth. One may work through most of the proffered "techniques" with the same word-centered perspective controlling the evaluation: journaling, quiet days, accountability/prayer groups, and so forth.

5. *Finally, such Word-centered reflection will bring us back to the fact that spirituality, as we have seen, is a theological construct.* We will be forced to revise our construct in terms of what we find in the Scriptures. If spirituality is related to the knowledge of God by his Spirit, then the experience of genuine spirituality must be tied to what it means to have the Spirit. In one sense, then, all those who by God's grace exercise saving faith in Christ Jesus have the Spirit (Rom 8:9) and are "spiritual" (1 Cor 2:14–15). But then we are to "live by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16), and that means self-consciously putting to death the "acts of sinful nature" and producing the "fruit of the Spirit": There is a profoundly moral and ethical dimension to spirituality. The Spirit is also the one who enables and empowers believers

to testify about Jesus (John 15:26–27; Acts 4:8; etc.): There is a kerygmatic dimension to spirituality. The Spirit is the *arrabōn*, the down payment and guarantee of the promised inheritance: There is an eschatological dimension to spirituality, as the bride, the Church, joins the Spirit in crying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22). And so we could go on, adding dimensions to any construct of spirituality controlled by the Word of God, correcting ourselves and our experience by Scripture, so that we may enjoy the fullness of the heritage that is ours in Christ Jesus while remaining entirely unwilling to be seduced by every passing fad. Only then shall we approach an all-of-life approach to spirituality—every aspect of human existence, personal and corporate, brought under the discipline of the Word of God, brought under the consciousness that we live in the presence of God, by his grace and for his glory. We shall cry to God that all our expressions of spirituality may be truly spiritual.[36]

[36] A slightly shorter version of this paper has been published in Portuguese: "Quando a Espiritualidade é Espiritual: Reflexões Sobre Alguns Problemas de Definição," *Chamado Para Servir*. Festschrift *for Russell Shedd* (ed. A. Pieratt; São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1994).