

CHAPTER 31

Spirituality

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In a dimly lit chapel of an Episcopal women's community, a dozen people gather for vespers. Their voices softly chant the psalms as candles flicker and a gentle peace settles on the night.

On the grounds of a United Methodist retreat center, seminary students learn to walk the labyrinth. They slowly wind their way through curving paths that move in and out, toward and back away from the center point. They practice the journey here, wondering how they will reach the center, letting go of that, being present to the walking.

At a yoga center, rows of women and men move into downward dog, their bodies stretching and releasing – breathe, the instructor reminds them, breathe.

These three snapshots offer a glimpse into the variety of forms of contemporary spirituality, a term used widely today to connote many forms of practice. It is by now a truism to point to the American phenomenon of “spiritual, but not religious.” Still, it is true that spirituality captures the imagination and the hearts of many who would not identify with religious institutions. They may feel that religion confines, while spirituality frees. They may have been injured by religion and reject its hypocrisy and abuse of power. Yet, they feel called to something higher or drawn to affirm a center inside themselves that runs deep. Spirituality encompasses this and offers transformative practices and a language to express that deep human experience.

Spirituality is a term at home in Jewish and Buddhist circles, among yoga enthusiasts and environmentalists, musicians and holistic health practitioners. Contemporary spirituality in practice often draws upon multiple traditions and trajectories simultaneously. Indeed, the reality of multiple religious participation is an important practical theological issue with implications for how we understand spirituality, tradition, and belonging in the church.

Spirituality also is widely embraced by Christians, expanding beyond Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities to a wide swath of Protestant denominations. While many seek spirituality outside the church, it is also true that Christian traditions carry tremendous resources for the spiritual life. The study, critical assessment, and creative retrieval of these traditions of Christian spirituality are important tasks of practical theology. In particular, there is a great need for more attention to the ministries of spiritual formation, spiritual renewal, and spiritual guidance. These are critical tasks of the church. It is vital to foster dialogue between the various kinds of ecclesial contexts and communities that share this work – the home, congregation, retreat center, seminaries, monasteries, centers of spiritual direction training. As the contemporary flurry of interest in spirituality demonstrates, people are seeking meaning and sustaining practices to nurture and guide them. Practical theologians and scholars of spirituality can make a contribution here.

This essay will offer a glimpse into the field of spirituality studies and will explore several points of convergence between practical theology and the study of spirituality: attention to the transformative nature of practice; interest in the teaching and learning of spiritual wisdom; critical conversations about justice; interdisciplinary and correlational methodologies. The study of spirituality can keep practical theology powerfully focused on the lived experience of faith – an animating center of our work. At the same time, practical theology can contribute richly to spirituality studies. Because spirituality studies is a discipline in its own right, practical theology and spirituality are best understood as disciplinary partners.

Encountering the Word

The *Conferences* of John Cassian (c.360–433) depict an early tradition of Christian spirituality, that of the desert fathers and mothers. The text is set up as a dialogue between Cassian, his companion Germanus, and the *abbas* they encountered during their sojourn in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century. The *Conferences* show the importance of the practices of prayer and *lectio divina*, a meditative reading of scripture, within this ancient tradition of Christian spirituality. In describing the struggle to pray without ceasing and to attain purity of heart, Germanus astutely describes a kind of distraction and spiritual superficiality:

For when our mind has understood a passage from any psalm, imperceptibly it slips away, and thoughtlessly and stupidly it wanders off to another text of Scripture. And when it has begun to reflect on this passage within itself, the recollection of another text shuts out reflection on the previous material, although it had not yet been completely aired . . . It is unable to reject or retain anything by its own doing, nor can it come to a conclusion about anything by fully judging or examining it, having become a mere toucher and taster of spiritual meanings and not a begetter and possessor of them. (Cassian 2001: 385–386)

How do we move from being a mere toucher and taster of spiritual wisdom to something more profound, more life-encompassing? Abba Isaac speaks about the internal

"steadfastness of heart" and the faithful practice that "stabilize a wandering mind." He encourages constant meditation on this verse from the Psalms, a saving devotional formula: "O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me" (Cassian 2001: 386).

Practical theologians could well facilitate a critical conversation between such classic texts in spirituality and contemporary contexts. Can one draw parallels between the spiritual difficulties named in the desert texts and those of contemporary contexts? Contemporary culture – with its emphasis on productivity, mobility, and consumerism – propels us to touch many things rather than living deeply into one thing, one tradition, one practice, one place, one verse. What alternative vision do the desert elders offer?

The desert elders might be interesting dialogue partners for contemporary theological educators and students. Many practical theologians have addressed the fragmentation of theological education (see, for example, Edward Farley's influential 1983 book *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*). Students may well resonate with Germanus's complaint, as they jump through long reading lists in disparate areas of the curriculum, often without time or guidance about how to integrate their study into a whole, practiced way of life. By contrast, Douglas Burton-Christie, scholar of early monasticism and a leader in the discipline of spirituality, describes what he calls the "desert hermeneutic": "To interpret a word meant striving to somehow realize it in one's life and to be transformed by that realization" (Burton-Christie 2005: 100). Early desert traditions of spirituality, transmitted through the *Sayings* and works such as the *Conferences*, offer a significant alternative vision of theological learning, one rooted in a practiced spirituality, nourished by scripture and other words that are encountered deeply, slowly, interpreted at the risk of transformation.

Of course, appreciative retrieval of traditions must be accompanied by critical reflection. There is no simple process of translating practices from long ago into contemporary contexts with radically different theological starting points and cultural norms. Practical theology offers correlational methodologies that can provide tools in this work. For example, practical theologian Don S. Browning proposes a mutually critical dialogue between the theory-laden practices of Christian spiritual traditions and the questions, issues, and practices of contemporary contexts (on mutually critical correlation and practical theology, see Browning 1995). Thus, for example, through engagement with the desert *abbas* and *ammas* we might consider how to cultivate purity of heart and how to dwell deeply in a practice. We might learn much about the practice of discernment (*diakrisis*) and spiritual guidance. At the same time, we might well articulate theological norms by which we might well critique assumptions about women found in the *Sayings* and wrestle with whether "withdrawal" to the desert is necessary in the quest for holiness. We read in the desert *Sayings* this story, for example: "Abraham, the disciple of Abbot Sisois, said to him: Father you are an old man. Let's go back to the world. Abbot Sisois replied, Very well, we'll go where there are no women. His disciple said: What is the place in which there are no women, except the desert alone? The elder replied to him: Therefore take me into the desert" (cited in Merton 1960: 49).

The study of spirituality requires careful historical work and theological assessment. This work is all the more important because spirituality is practiced. As traditions such

as the desert *Sayings* reveal, and as scholars such as Burton-Christie emphasize, spirituality is lived and practiced, the words of the past heard at the risk of transformation. Practical theological study of spirituality puts up front and center this critical, imaginative, and mutually vulnerable dialogue between historical traditions and contemporary contexts.

Spirituality and the Work of Justice

Part of this dialogue involves a serious examination of the ways in which spiritual traditions perpetuate injustice. Spirituality is best understood as a way of life embedded in a tradition and woven together with relationships with God, self, neighbor, community, and the created world. Spirituality points to a web of relationships in which we practice holiness. The relationship between spirituality and social justice is receiving more attention as scholars and religious leaders point to interconnections between authentic spirituality and just action.

In the midst of the struggle against apartheid, for example, South African theologian John de Gruchy protested against the churches' complicity with the apartheid government. What could have led churchgoing people to turn a blind eye to the murder and oppression of blacks in South Africa? How could theology justify a regime of torture and discrimination? De Gruchy put the blame in part on a dangerously individualistic and otherworldly spirituality, an "unbiblical privatization of piety which has separated prayer and the struggle for justice" (1986: 33). This critique needs serious attention from practical theologians and scholars of spirituality. How do we retrieve the wisdom of classical traditions of Christian spirituality while attending seriously to the demands of social, economic, political, and environmental justice and the complexities of politics?

Christian spirituality is ambivalent on this point. Many traditions of Christian spirituality prioritize the contemplative over the active life and remain silent about politics. Yet, Christian spirituality also offers resources for a more engaged spirituality. Scholars have begun to uncover the interconnections between mysticism and social transformation, exploring the dynamic relationship between contemplation and action in figures such as Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, George Fox, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman, and Desmond Tutu (see, e.g., Ruffing 2001; Rakoczy 2006). There is the promise of a liberative spirituality. Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes: "Living under conditions of such hardship, African women and men have learnt to identify the good, attribute it to God in Christ, and live a life of prayer in the anticipation that the liberative potential of the person of Jesus will become a reality in their lives" (2002: 166). Latin American liberation theologians have insisted that praxis on behalf of the poor and oppressed must be integral to Christian spirituality. These examples point to a dynamic relationship between contemplation and just action within authentic Christian spirituality.

In any movement toward a spirituality that does justice, the suppression of women's voices within religion – including the traditions of Christian spirituality – must be redressed. For the spiritual traditions themselves are tarred by patriarchalism – the

muting of women's voices; skepticism about and repression of women's religious experience; narrow definitions of women's saintliness; denigration of the body (and women's bodies in particular); neglect of the holiness of the everyday and domestic. The historical retrieval of women's voices and constructive reflection about contemporary women's spirituality are vital tasks, and scholars have made substantial contributions here (see, e.g., Conn 1996). Feminist spirituality has arisen both within religious communities and outside of any religious affiliation. It takes as a critical starting point the experiences of women and sets as a normative commitment the liberation and full flourishing of women. Nicola Slee writes: "Feminist spirituality, in contrast to women's spirituality more generally, arises from the consciousness of women's oppression and is a quest to overcome women's marginalization in religion as in every other sphere of life" (2004: 176).

Increasingly, attention to justice and right relationship also extends to the natural world, to environmental justice and a corresponding ecological spirituality. This emerging movement includes action to combat ecological devastation and new efforts in spiritual formation to accentuate awareness of our relatedness to the earth. This heightened attention to the created world has also sparked a rereading of spiritual classics, as in New Zealander Neil Vaney's (2004) ecological meditation on Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. Theological reflection about the natural world crosses religious traditions. A series entitled "Religions of the World and Ecology" (published by Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions), for example, includes volumes on Buddhism, Judaism, Jainism, Daoism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Christianity.

The Emergence of an Academic Discipline

It is useful to distinguish between spirituality as experience or practice and spirituality as the study of that experience or practice. Bernard McGinn describes these as, respectively, "first-order" and "second-order" spirituality (2005: 29). I contend that practical theology must attend both to the animating center of lived faith and to the scholarly discipline of spirituality.

The study of spirituality (and Christian spirituality, in particular) has emerged as an academic discipline in its own right. The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality was founded in 1991 and became a "Related Scholarly Organization" of the American Academy of Religion the following year. It meets annually in conjunction with the AAR. This organization of scholars in spirituality also launched the refereed journal *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001 to the present). The edited volume *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* offers an important resource and an overview of issues in the field (Dreyer and Burrows 2005). Numerous historical and thematic overviews of Christian spirituality are available – see, e.g., the helpful reference *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, edited by Arthur Holder (2005).

Many scholars of spirituality rightly resist the placement of spirituality as a "sub-discipline" of another field such as theology or ethics. The study of spirituality is inter-

disciplinary, drawing upon scholarship in theology, biblical studies, ethics, history, psychology, sociology, neurobiology, feminist studies, ritual studies, literary criticism, and aesthetics. As a field of study, spirituality is best understood as a disciplinary partner – not as a “subdiscipline” – of practical theology.

Because spirituality is multifaceted, it can be approached through many distinct though complementary methods. Several approaches to the study of spirituality stand out in the scholarly literature as the field has developed over the past 30 years.

The anthropological or hermeneutical approach is articulated by Sandra Schneiders, a New Testament scholar and one of the leaders in the academic discipline of spirituality. She draws upon multiple disciplines to understand the phenomenon of spiritual life as experienced across contexts and traditions (2005: 56). Schneiders and other scholars have sought language for a shared human experience, proposing general definitions of spirituality that could cut across multiple religious traditions and even encompass those who would claim a secular spirituality. For example, the editors of the *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* series (which includes volumes on Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, Confucian, African, Native, and secular spiritualities) note that they did not seek a precise definition of spirituality that would be accepted by such diverse traditions. Still, in the preface to each volume in the series they propose a general description of their subject matter, to be amplified and clarified by authors of each volume:

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions “the spirit.” This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension . . . experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal.

Such inclusive definitions of spirituality facilitate conversation across religious and cultural traditions and make space for spiritualities that eschew religious affiliations.

While such approaches focus on what might be common to human experience, spirituality is still highly contextual and particular, and thus it is no surprise that historians have made significant contributions to the field. Rather than exploring spirituality as a dimension of universal human experience, historical-contextual approaches carefully investigate the particular contexts out of which a spiritual community, tradition, or practice arises. The *Crossroad* three-volume collection on Christian spirituality includes chapters on spiritual guidance in early Christianity; spirituality in late medieval Russia, early Jesuit spirituality in Spain and Italy, the spirituality of John Calvin, Puritan spirituality in America, and the spirituality of Afro-American traditions. Such works indicate the range of historical scholarship in spirituality (Raitt 1988; Dupré and Saliers 1991; McGinn et al. 1992).

Drawing upon a wide range of new methodologies, historical work can recover marginalized voices from within the tradition or provide more nuanced interpretations of classic figures (Sheldrake 1991). Studying spirituality within a historical context is invaluable for understanding spirituality, although McGinn notes that historical study

"cannot, of itself, address normative questions" (2005: 34). Instead, the historical-contextual approach complements anthropological and theological approaches.

Clearly, theological reflection on spirituality is vital as well. Amidst the dizzying array of contemporary spiritualities, how does one discern which are life-giving, true, or faithful? What norms come into play as we choose spiritual practices or offer spiritual guidance? As mysticism scholar Mark McIntosh writes, theology provides an essential critical function. At the same time, the lived experience of faith literally animates theology, breathing life into it, orienting theology as a way of life seeking embodied knowledge of God:

So while it is very true that theology provides an indispensable critical function for spirituality, it is no less true that spirituality affords a radically critical perspective equally necessary for the health of theology . . . exposing theology to the profound questioning that animates the very heart of the community's struggle to be faithful. (McIntosh 1998: 17)

Practical Theology and Spirituality

In my view, practical theology has much to add to these approaches to the study of spirituality. According to Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman: "The basic task that orients practical theology is to promote faithful discipleship." Disciples follow Jesus and bear "witness to the new life they now have with God through the Spirit" (Cahalan and Nieman 2008: 67). The nurture of faithful discipleship can in fact be understood as central to both practical theology and the study of Christian spirituality. Practical theologians bring a rich understanding of the nature of practice, methods for constructing critical dialogue between traditions and contemporary contexts, and an explicitly formative and transformative aim.

As seen in our earlier discussion of Cassian and desert spirituality, practices are integral to spirituality. Practices are more than an application of what we believe. Spiritual practices pattern people into faithful living and enable people to come to know something of the holy. Traditional understandings of Christian spirituality emphasized practices such as prayer, Bible study, *lectio divina*, liturgical participation, spiritual direction, and acts of charity. While many today seek to learn about spiritual practice from other sources, Christian classics such as Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* or Benedict's *Rule* still speak of something essential to the spiritual life – the importance of prayer, community, labor, rest, and hospitality, for example. When the classics are read closely, they often reveal the complexities of practices. Teresa of Avila, a "doctor of prayer," struggled with prayer for 20 years, as she reveals in her spiritual autobiography, *The Book of Her Life*. The study of historical texts in spirituality is an incredibly rich source for reflection on practices.

Broader definitions of spirituality today encompass a wide scope of everyday life, naming spiritual practices rooted in work, family life, politics, art, household economics, child care, and care of the body (see, e.g., the *Practices of Faith* series, published by Jossey-Bass, including the collection of essays in its first volume *Practicing Our Faith*: Bass 2010). It is not uncommon to hear discussion of "secular spiritualities." The book

Spirituality and the Secular Quest, a volume in the Crossroad series in World Spirituality, includes chapters on holistic health practices, scientific inquiry, 12-step programs, psychotherapies, and sports (Van Ness 1996).

Practical theologians are well situated to study contemporary practice with close attention to the particularities of context, in dialogue with the historical traditions of Christian spirituality, and with an eye toward both analysis and constructive reflection. This constructive reflection considers how to form and transform disciples, necessarily taking into account the integral relationship between contemplative practice and just action. It moves from description and interpretation to creative envisioning of ways to embody faith in changing communities and contexts.

In turn, the study of spirituality keeps practical theology in touch with the lived experience of faith. It opens up the experiences and questions of ordinary people who yearn for something transcendent in their lives, who have a sense of (or deep desire for) the holy, mystery, presence. The study of spirituality retrieves wisdom from centuries of spiritual seekers while attending carefully to historical context and drawing upon the human sciences for understanding. Like practical theology, then, spirituality is deeply concerned with practices, contexts, and communities; the embodiment of a way of life; critical appraisal of traditions in light of the demands of faith and justice; and the teaching of spiritual wisdom. There is much potential here for fruitful conversation and collaboration between these disciplines (for a longer explication of the relationship between practical theology and spirituality, see Wolfteich 2009).

Spirituality is a life animated by the Spirit of God, practiced with love, holiness, and justice. It is a life both received through grace and built up over time through the cultivation of practices in a sustaining community. Practical theology and spirituality both attend to the transformation of persons and communities. This is a transformation that moves toward faithful discipleship and ecclesial renewal. It works for freedom, stands with the poor, and delights in right relationship with the natural world. And ultimately, this transformation may have something to do with the passion and illumination of which Abba Joseph dared to speak, stretching out hands to heaven:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame." (Bondi 1991: 7)

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