

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 16

Volume 16 • Number 2 • April 1992

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission [p. 115](#)

Editorial

Towards an Evangelical Spirituality

Global spirituality is the preoccupation of our age. The forthcoming 16 volumes on *World Spirituality* plan to develop a new discipline in the field of religion with a comprehensive survey of past and present paths to spirituality worldwide. James Houston calls these studies a 'new expression of Gnosticism'.

Each religion offers its own distinctive pilgrimage. Some aspects enshrine particular truths which are uplifting and morally edifying. Every day millions of Hindus pray the Upanishadic Prayer:

From the unreal lead me to the real
From the darkness lead me to light
From death lead me to immortality

The daily call to prayer from the minaret is a call to submission to God who is Great. Other aspects of religious pilgrimage are self-centredness leading to selfishness, arrogance and violence, while others are overtly idolatrous and demonic, resulting in fear and bondage to elemental spirits. Secular spiritualities are blatantly materialistic and hedonistic. The eclecticism of New Age philosophies and religions reflect the present-day search for global spirituality. Religious and secular spiritualities are but shadows of the nature of mankind, created in the image of God with a thirst for communion with the Ultimate and yet fallen in sin and guilt and rebellious against the Laws of God and ever seeking to manipulate God through idolatrous cultic practices.

Christian spirituality is a sustained and living relationship of trust with the personal triune Creator-Redeemer God. It is experiencing Christ's Kingly reign in daily life. In the words of Klaus Bockmuehl it is 'living the Gospel'. The history of the Church is a rich mosaic of different paths to communion with God and service in the world ranging from the disciplines of the contemplative life of the early Church Fathers, east and west and mediaeval mystics to the Word-centred spiritualities and puritan ethics of the Reformation era, to the holiness and mission-centred spiritualities and puritan ethics of the Reformation era, to the holiness and mission-centred Christologies of the Evangelical Awakening from Wesley to the present time. The twentieth century has seen the phenomenal growth and global spread of pentecostal and charismatic spiritualities.

True spirituality must be both inward and interpersonal and yet controlled by coherent theological understanding. All too often these aspects of spirituality have been set against each other whereas they are inseparable. Experience and understanding are interdependent [p. 116](#) and the failure to realise this has led many into bypath meadows. True spirituality must be thoroughly trinitarian, welcoming the security and discipline of

the sovereign Father, experiencing reconciliation and fellowship in union with Christ and being guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit for service. False spiritualities, Christian or otherwise, begin with an inadequate or perverted understanding of the doctrine of God. Thus a Christian theology of spirituality must be wholistic without being syncretistic; it must be both transcendental and immanent. There are at least four components or spheres of experience that are essential to maintaining spiritual growth and maturity in the knowledge of God and of the self.

The first sphere is a direct and personal knowledge of God expressed in constant prayer and meditation, in repentance and purity of heart and in experiencing the love and justice of God. Symeon the New Theologian of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Charles Simeon of the Evangelical Awakening and Sadhu Sundar Singh of Indian spirituality are models of the piety which characterizes and inspires evangelicals in their pilgrimage. The theological dictum of Augustine, Anselm and others, 'I believe that I may understand' is our starting point.

The second dimension is understanding and applying the truth of God's self revelation. Evangelicals have always given priority to the Bible as the authoritative and trustworthy Word of God and sought to rightly exegete it and apply it to daily living. Gerhard Maier has addressed this issue in his article 'What is Spiritual Exegesis?'. Evangelical spiritualities aim to accept the discipline of the Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice. To our shame, we like others have all too often rationalized and manipulated the Scriptures to further our selfish ambitions and to satisfy the lusts of the flesh.

The third component of our theology of spirituality is a constant striving to live in unity and fellowship with 'the people of God'. We reflect on the universal creeds and on the Statement of Faith of our churches and evangelical ecumenical agencies. We humbly listen and learn from other traditions, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, ever subjecting these traditions of the Church to the authority of the Word of God. We live in the mystery of being members of the Body of Christ. We love the Church and give our lives for her purity and growth throughout the world. We affirm the continuity of the apostolic Faith yet ever look to the reformed being continually reformed. Our individualism is subject to the constraints of the Church, locally and universally expressed.

Lastly, true spirituality is being in the world but not of it. Spirituality without praxis in the world will never liberate those in bondage to sin [p. 117](#) or to social injustices. Spirituality is made visible in mission and mission is motivated and sustained by true spirituality. Evangelical spirituality must be seen in word and deed.

May this issue of ERT encourage all of us to press on towards the mark of our high calling in Christ Jesus. [p. 118](#)

The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Theology

James M. Houston

Printed with permission from Crux June and September 1991

WHY THE CONTEMPORARY INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY?

'Spirituality' is still such a recent term that it requires some definition. Clearly it starts from a religious base, although it is now being used more widely. But the definition given in the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* is broad enough:

A word which has come into vogue to describe those attitudes, beliefs, practices, which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards supersensible realities.¹

That we live, in the Western world, within an environment of spiritual deprivation and impoverishment, is very obvious. However, this is not only true of our secular life, but it is becoming obvious also with our religious life and its service. What is notional may not be transformational, so the hunger for spirituality is for what is personal, as opposed to what is impersonal, firsthand as opposed to what is secondary, and applied as opposed to what is merely theoretical. Spirituality involves then the enlargement of our awareness of God, of what gives a living, growing relationship before God and with each other.²

Spirituality is identifiable with the intensification of the self-consciousness that we see in contemporary society. So it is not necessarily evidence of religious renewal within our secular world. In the 1960s the eruption of the drug culture with its Dionysian frenzy of sexual freedom, was a defiant rebellion against Technological Society. The 1970s followed with the powerful *Drang am Osten*, the journey eastwards and inward, with Transcendental Meditation, Silva Mind Control, occultism, est, and the new eclecticism of Zen Buddhism, Gurdjieff, and the religious writings of the East. The 1980s have followed with the culture of self-fulfilment, transactional analysis, and p. 119 personality tests to find out one's own type of personality. For all these movements, from 'sex' to 'spooks' to 'spiritual,' spirituality is in vogue!

However, in this lecture we are concerned only with Christian spirituality, which has to do with what lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. It focuses on our personal prayer life, on communion with God, on what Christians in the past have called 'the interior life.' Not that we should ever seek either to privatize the faith, or ignore what unconscious motives may control behaviour. Such insights may gain us greater freedom and more consistency between belief and action, attitudes and service. It calls then, for much greater discernment, a richer relational and personal life, and more realistic guidance in the application of doctrine to behaviour.

Passing fads are dangerous. As George Santayana wisely observed, whoever is married to the spirit of the age is condemned to be widowed in the next. But there are too many multiple indications to suggest that the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality is

¹ Gordon Wakefield, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: S.C.M., 1983):361.

² Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984):7.

merely a passing whim.³ I shall outline four major interrelated reasons for this remarkable interest in Christian spirituality today. Not all the motives and reasons are positive and true, which perhaps explains why not all Christians are fully convinced of the validity of this emphasis. But reluctance is often associated with a fear of losing self-control, either rationalistically so, or from fear of personal intimacy being opened up. So the challenge of Christian spirituality is cause for some confusion and concern about one's personal life and thought.

The first reason for the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality is the practical concern that beyond any intellectual pursuit of theological studies, we should seek to know God more personally and intimately. In other words, it stems from the desire to experience the reality of the Kingdom of God in daily life. The faithful are desperate to experience the living God beyond the heavy rationalistic framework of Western Christianity, with its hierarchical structure of authority, its abstract teachings, and its liturgical ritualism. Moreover, the shift from a more intellectual to a more existential approach places more emphasis upon daily behaviour and the ethic of faith, upon 'Living the Gospel', as our colleague Klaus Bockmuehl wrote about.

We know so little of God in spite of all our theological literature. Indeed, much of the literature seems merely to play scholarly games that trivialize, rather than enrich, our faith. Meanwhile, the radical p. 120 cultural changes we are living through today give us a deep impulse and hunger for inner experiences that we sense only God can satisfy. We know so little about ourselves, so we seek to explore more of the inner recesses of our own hearts, in prayer. There is a growing conviction that only in prayer will a man or woman be more fully one's self, as a person-before-God. So there is such a real hunger to become prayerful, meditative Christians today.

At the same time, many are abandoning the verbal expressions of prayer, learned merely by rote. Oral prayer is being probed for its own integrity, and also being expanded by more emphasis upon meditation, recollection, and other historic traditions of spirituality. Likewise, there is more questioning of what it means to be a 'Bible reader.'⁴ Does it only involve inductive Bible study? Is it the mere acquisition of biblical knowledge? Letting the Word of God get into the heart, through the head, is a renewed concern, in order to help us be more consciously enriched believers. We have hints of such personal knowledge when we see the serenity of presence in a friend, and catch the heart-felt convictions of life and behaviour. It is what the early Church Fathers called *pneumatophoros*, a carrier or vehicle of the Spirit. Many Christians long to experience Christ more intimately, to see Christ actually formed in them.

What keeps many Christians from being freed of their alienation from God is ignorance of their own emotional and relational handicaps, regardless of their theological education and intelligence. This, of course, is the consequence of the unfortunate fact that theology and psychology are both independent of each other today. The conviction of all the great thinkers of the Church has been that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self cannot be separated. 'Let me know Thee, O God, let me know myself,'⁵ the prayer of Augustine, has echoed consistently in all true Christian aspiration. What exacerbates this absence of intimacy with God is 'the barrenness of a busy life'. In a function-orientated

³ See the essays in *Can Spirituality be Taught?* ed. Jill Robson and David Lonsdale (London, Association of Centres of Adult theological association and the British Council of Churches, 1988).

⁴ James Houston, 'The Act of Bible Reading: Towards a Biblical Spirituality' in *How do you Read?*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) (forthcoming).

⁵ Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 11,7.

society, activism is viewed as the norm of Christian life. Perhaps many have grown up in families that only knew a merely 'functional way' of relating. They 'did' what was required of them in family expectations. So their usefulness in Christian ministries is the norm of acceptance, and church programmes are the definition of fellowship. It is essentially an outward-orientated consciousness that *shallows* inward reflection and relatedness. This p. 121 explains the spiritual emptiness and disillusionment of so many well-intentioned Christians. So just when there is a major societal shift taking place away from 'Rational' towards 'Psychological' man, evangelical leadership finds itself with little tradition of giving guidance to 'the interior life' of their fellow Christians.

A *second reason* for the growing interest in spirituality is the desire of many of the laity to become more truly 'the people of God.'

The growth in public education has led many lay people to become discontented with religious platitudes and sermonizing. They want to use intelligent minds intelligently. Relating their own faith to their own professions, they need to think for themselves. To do so, they need to de-institutionalize a 'churchy faith,' to embrace a broader basis of ordinary life under the realm of the gospel. They resent the unspoken assumption that whereas the clergy 'are the Church,' the laity 'go to church.'⁶ Yet there is still hesitancy to trespass across professional boundaries into another discipline, even if that discipline is simply a more skilled tool for the understanding of theological education.

But institutional loyalties generally are reaching a low ebb within post-modern study.⁷ In place of hierarchical structures, lateral shifts to more customized, less mass-produced relationships, are taking place—in business, and in education. Our churches then, cannot afford to remain content with the mass-production of the sermon, and the liturgy. The growing trend of the adjunct counselling services in our churches reflects this demand to address the individual's needs. Clearly then the need for more training in spiritual direction will be the trend of future ministry.⁸ Yet we have been happy to allow our secular poets and writers to explore inner consciousness, as James Joyce's *Ulysses* does fabulously. But in Protestant tradition we have little experience today of giving guidance to the 'interior life'. Now spontaneously, a new literature is filling this void.

Spirituality today, then, is in part a protest movement against the hollowness of much Christian activism. Many para-church movements are like shadow companies, where the stock-holders are beguiled by the promotion of non-existent products. They are bureaux of information about human needs, though not necessarily involved in actually giving bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked, freedom to p. 122 the captives. Hence we have expensive conferences which describe ministry situations yet are led by 'experts' who are not actually engaged in such ministry. So Christian spirituality would call the bluff to appearances, primarily in dealing with the hearts of men and women and women. For clearly, 'out of the heart are the issues of life.'⁹

A *third cause* of interest in spirituality today is the eclecticism that drives the East and the West to come together, to live with one religious faith within the 'global village.' This exploits the deeply-seated conviction that the interior life is always the better life, and indeed that inwardness leads to truth and even divinity.

⁶ Anne Rowthorn, *The Liberation of the Laity* (Connecticut: Morehouse, Barlow, Wilton, 1986).

⁷ George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle. What Christians need to know about life in the Year 2000* (California: Regal Books, 1990): 169–182.

⁸ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982).

⁹ [Proverbs 4:23](#).

In fact, the journey inward is often the way to deepen the autonomy of the individual, which is a strong tendency of secular man today. The cult of self-fulfilment which 'pop psychology' has promoted in our generation, has unleashed a fragmentation of social life. In the past, self-fulfilment was strongly cultivated in Buddhism as a way of satisfying the human need of a spiritual life outside all religion. From the original *Hinayana*, deliberately areligious, Buddhism developed toward the *Mahayana*, a new form of popular religion that now worships the Buddha as a god, who himself was an atheist who had detached himself from the gods! Such a spiritual life may seem paradoxical but it is predictable that new forms of such atheist spirituality are in the making today.

The way such secular spirituality is being argued is, of course, as ancient as the Gnostics, who confronted the early Church. This secular or 'New Age' spirituality assumes that the inner dimension of the person is 'the spirit.' This 'spiritual core' is the deepest centre of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension. It is here that the person can experience ultimate reality. When post-modern Man dismisses dogma as Enlightenment Man did, and now dismisses rational explanation, then it becomes acceptable to embrace all forms of spirituality—of Islam, of Buddhism, of the ancient Greeks, and indeed even of all primitive religions as well. Indeed, some feminists would advocate recovery of the Mother-Goddess of the ancient Near East, and of reinstating paganism.

Today, comparative religious studies are often tracing the continuity of the archaic to the contemporary spiritualities since, of course, the humanity of man has not changed. But in upholding the intrinsic worth of such spiritualities, such scholarship shows a contempt of dogma, as the Enlightenment also did. New expressions of Gnosticism are in the p. 123 making, notably in a major scholarly enterprise called 'World Spirituality,' where some 450 scholars are being organized to produce sixteen volumes, concluding with dialogues and new syntheses. The general editor, Ewert Cousins, claims:

The series is attempting to forge a new discipline in the field of religion, the discipline of spirituality ... We might say there is emerging a new discipline: global spirituality. Such a discipline would study spirituality not merely in one tradition or era but in a comprehensive geographic and historical context. And it would take into account this vast body of data, not in isolation but in inter-relationship ... By drawing the material into the focus of world spirituality, it can provide a perspective for understanding one's place in the larger process. For it may well be that the meeting of spiritual paths is the assimilation not only of one's own spiritual heritage but that of the human community as a whole—as the distinctive spiritual journey of our time.¹⁰

In other words, instead of upholding the uniqueness of Christian spirituality by encouraging the ecumenicity of the communion of saints across the ages, now global spirituality will express the syncretism of all world religions in a new amalgam for the next century.

This relativization of the Christian faith is not new. Neo-Platonism has been a persistent influence within Christendom. The common religious experience of 'mysticism'

¹⁰ Ewert Cousins (General Editor), Preface to the Series, *World Spirituality, Christian Spirituality*, vol. 16 (New York: Cross Roads, 1985):13.

was advocated by W.R. Inge,¹¹ Rufus Jones¹² and Evelyn Underhill¹³ in the early part of this century. The World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 saw a public demand for it. But what is new is the post-war theological advocacy of such religious pluralism by renegade Christian theologians such as William Hockings, Wilfred Cantwell Smith,¹⁴ and John Hick.¹⁵ In 1987, a prominent group of theologians published a series of essays on *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.¹⁶ Karl Rahner led the initiative in Vatican II conciliar reports, notably, *Nostra Aetate*, to generate the p. 124 image of 'anonymous Christians' in other religions.¹⁷ This opened the way to dialogue with other leaders of world religions, as in Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Such an approach assumes all religions have some natural knowledge of God, some supernatural elements of grace. 'Spirituality' becomes, then, the basis for a new global religious ecumenism.

Along with this spiritual syncretism, there is the contemporary tendency to exalt psychology as one variety of religious experience. Its introspective skills, its explanation of inner consciousness, and the hidden assumption that what lies closest to the soul lies closest to God, or is indeed divine, lead to a congenial relationship between secular psychology and New Age thinking. In reaction to the Enlightenment, then, the dam of the human mind has broken down, and the flood of consciousness, is creating havoc with former landmarks of behaviour, of relationships, as well as of faith and the habits of the heart. 'Spirituality' itself is being devalued, to include all kinds of consciousness, some more emotional, others more metaphysical. The danger of the former is subjectivism, so that people are tempted to believe they can make their spirituality turn-on, turn-off, like a drug trip. The danger of the latter is Gnosticism: having such a detached, observational stance that one is tempted to be superior in one's esoteric knowledge to the rest of the human species. Both approaches tend to be preoccupied with the *attributes* of spiritual experiences, either in terms of emotional sensations or else with metaphysical thoughts. Neither are really concerned with the true *essence* and *source* of spirituality, namely the Holy Spirit of God himself.

We now consider the *fourth reason* for the popular interest in spirituality, that I believe is the most fundamental. It is expressive of a rapid dissatisfaction with *modernity*, so that many thinkers now perceive themselves to be *post-modern*. It rejects the worldview developed since the seventeenth century, that created the Age of Enlightenment, and that continues in the scientific rationalism of the modern Technological Society. It is a reaction of fear that the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet. It is a confession of despair that the Enlightenment culture no longer enlightens.¹⁸

¹¹ W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, The Bampton Lectures (London: Methuen, 1899).

¹² Rufus Jones, *The New Quest* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism, a study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1911).

¹⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

¹⁵ John Hick, *God has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

¹⁶ John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: towards a pluralistic theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (New York: Seabury Press, 1971).

¹⁸ See for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951): 158ff.

If 'post-modern thought' is in reaction to 'modernism', what is this cultural groundswell that is challenging us, even in the way we p. 125 continue to 'think theologically'? Clearly, it is radical, as radical as the shift from the Middle Ages to the Modern world. Heidegger attacks the 'subjectivism' of Western thought. Gadamer re-orientates the interpreter's understanding from rationalized reconstruction to mediation with the past, translating past meaning into the present situation.¹⁹ Michael Polanyi writes against the false objectivism of scientism, in the light of 'Personal Knowledge'.²⁰ Enrique Dussel speaks of the need to move '*outside*' of ideological perspectives.²¹ Richard T. Bernstein, writes of 'Beyond Objectivism and Relativism',²² and Alastair McIntyre writes of 'Beyond Ethics'. In various ways, these thinkers and others like them, are all rebelling against the universalism of a scientific scholarship whose inflated claims have suppressed self-knowledge, let alone divine revelation.

To summarize these critiques we can say then, that like other major paradigmatic shifts of knowledge in the past, this mental revolution is about the conviction of 'explanation'. An explanation commands our assent with immediate authority when it presupposes 'the reality' or 'the truth' of what seems to be most real, most true. One cannot define 'explanation' absolutely, according to a more universal 'scientific' canon. One can only say that it is a statement which satisfies the community of a particular time and culture.²³ This is borne out by events in the eighteenth century. As the expansion of scientific enquiry grew, thinkers became increasingly unconvinced by the dogmatism of non-investigative churchmen. The demand grew then to 'explain' more 'scientifically'. In turn, this tended to squeeze out external sources of authority, heteronomously given, such as divine revelation. Instead, reason was assumed to be autonomous in its authority, in René Descartes' famous dictum: 'I think, therefore I am'. Doubt, which had previously been viewed negatively, was now elevated to a position of honour, with scepticism becoming the first principle of knowledge. There was now a new readiness to question everything.

In this growing climate of rationalism, Immanuel Kant forcefully p. 126 separated 'belief' from 'knowledge', assuming certainty can only be established rationally.²⁴ Belief was now assumed to create only uncertainty. 'The tearing apart of belief and knowledge' as Colin Gunton has expressed it,²⁵ created an exaggerated over-esteemed capacity for mental detachment with which we still live. Now reason in turn has become dissociated also from our whole emotional life, as well as from our historical heritage.²⁶ Cut off from self-knowledge in rationalistic alienation, we are also cut off from history in modernism's death of the past. That is why post-modernism is merely man's disillusionment with 'the

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. by David E. Linge (Los Angeles, CA.: University of California Press, 1977): 15.

²⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, towards a postcritical philosophy* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1958): 3117.

²¹ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978): 120–148.

²² Richard T. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985): 46.

²³ Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934): 10.

²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, The World Council of Churches (Geneva, 1984): 49.

²⁵ Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

²⁶ John McMurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

Technological Society'. For the rationality of modernity has been weighed in the balances and found wanting. As one of our students recently complained to me: 'my wife and I have been trained in the techniques to become competent counsellors, yet we remain woefully inadequate in our own personal relationships with each other!'

However, as Lesslie Newbigin²⁷ and David Bebbington²⁸ and others are showing us, our own evangelical faith has been influenced by the Enlightenment culture that no longer 'enlightens'. We see this in such statements that 'truth is propositional' or that the Bible's authority lies in its 'inerrancy'. These echo the Enlightenment's assumption that certainty is only rationalistic. So we need Michael Polanyi to remind us that our fundamental beliefs cannot be demonstrated merely by rationalization; they can only be held by the primacy of faith:

We must now recognize belief once more, as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside of such a fiduciary framework.²⁹

Thus, we are being forced back to the wisdom of Augustine, Anselm, and the other Church Fathers when they insisted: 'I believe, that I may understand'.

The biblical vision of reality places at the centre of personal life a [p. 127](#) living relationship of trust in a personal God, who is infinitely more trustworthy than all our efforts to 'explain'. Rational explanations are relativized by the cultural sanctions we live with, but our faith abides in the unchanging God. That is why each generation has to go on doing its theological explanations, as evidence of a living faith, but these three abide: Faith, Hope, and Love. It is the Johannine message, then, of branches that abide in the Vine, of sheep known by the Good Shepherd, of a disciple in the bosom of his Lord.

Renewed Christian spirituality in the post-modern world has then more to do with personal experience and faith in God than in explanations about him. What it means to be a 'person' likewise reflects more of our relationship to the 'personalness' of God than to psychological insights. What it means to be 'human' is more in our relational 'one-anotherness', than in the individualistic separatedness of modern man, with his insistence upon 'rights'. The centre that holds together, is Christ, 'who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich'. Our riches then are spiritual for they are relational; they are the offspring of love. Faithful relatedness to each other mirrors the faithfulness of God in our lives. It is our relationships then that truly 'explain', and not just our faculty of reasoning. These can be lived, not merely described and talked about. Thus the break with the Enlightenment ushers in a new challenge to the interpretation of theology for the future.

We have explored, then, four sources of the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality: the hunger to know and experience God more intimately and personally so; the demand of the laity to have a new identity within the established Church; the redirection of the interior life, no longer isolated as Western Man, but living in a more ecumenical, global world; and the quest of post-Enlightenment Man, to be freed from his own rationalist alienation. The latter, we have agreed, lies at the centre of these issues. This, too, we shall have to consider further.

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *op. cit.*

²⁸ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

²⁹ Michael Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p.267.

We are being told that we now live in 'the post-modern world'. By this is meant the reaction to rationalism and technocracy, and indeed, to all forms of totalitarian consciousness. The reaction then, is towards 'openness', indeed making 'change' a new ideology. With the loss of moral values today, such 'openness' can be a dangerous contributor to contemporary chaos. As G.K. Chesterton once remarked, if you open your mouth, or indeed your mind, then you need to close it again on something solid! So if we as Christians are open to new subjective challenges of 'Spirituality' then we need also reliable, objective spiritual theology as its counterpart. Of course, both are needed: a p. 128 spirituality that becomes more theological, and a theology that is more spiritual.

Perhaps the dilemma in theological education is not unlike that found in the Soviet Union today. How can communists, long habituated to living within a closed society, re-think and re-live democratically within a new, open society? Likewise, though the analogy may be too harsh, how can theologians, trained and motivated by the intellectual society of the Enlightenment of Kant or of Hegel, suddenly repent and re-think theologically in a manner more appropriate to post-modernity?³⁰ Yet while we ask such a radical question, we might make it more radical still, by asking how we ought to 'think theologically', if by the knowledge of 'God' we mean the Holy Trinity? For it has been our fallen tendency to allow the pre-theological autonomy of human thought to dictate our theological investigations, without reflecting upon what we are doing. Hence the objective reality of God's own Being has readily been eclipsed and distorted by our ways of thinking and of behaving towards him.

The true quest of theology is still that of faith seeking understanding. It is the conscious experience of this quest of Faith, this synthesis of thought and action, this self-consciousness of how we can know God personally, and experience him in our daily lives that is the nature and purpose of Spiritual Theology.

It is expressive of a prophetic posture to warn that when theological education fails to promote the spiritual life, it risks losing its own centre and even its *raison d'être*. We need a re-interpretation of spirituality and theology today, in a grammar appropriate to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. A mere theoretical knowledge of God is impossible. Knowing God is to be changed by God. It is improper then, to separate the elements of the spiritual life of the believer from the study of theology itself.

The subtitle of Dr. Richard F. Lovelace's well known book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, is 'a Manual of Spiritual Theology'. This, he explains, is 'a discipline' combining the history and theology of Christian experience'. He further comments: 'Catholic Christians have long recognised the existence and central importance of this study, and it is time that Protestants realized that they share with Catholics a deep interest and a rich heritage in Christian Spirituality'.³¹ It is one of p. 129 the unfortunate reactions of the Reformation that Protestants cut themselves off from the whole medieval contemplative heritage of the church, on the grounds that the gift of contemplation was 'popish'. The Protestant endeavour to return to the 'primitive church' was also a denial of the communion of saints, resulting in ahistoricism. The renewed contemporary interest in spirituality is awakening evangelicals to their resultant spiritual losses. Dr. Lovelace makes the further point

Since virtually all the problems of the church, including bad theology, issue from defective spirituality, the attention given to spiritual theology—that is, to the question of how to

³⁰ See John Milbank, 'The second difference: for a trinitarianism without reserve', *Modern Theology* 2, 1986, p. 213–234.

³¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p.11.

keep all the cells in the body of Christ in optimum health and running order—should culminate in a new vitality in the church.³²

Yet Spiritual Theology remains ignored in the Protestant world and this chair at Regent College may be the only one of its kind in evangelical colleges and seminaries. We are happy to know that a younger generation of theological teachers are now making it their new focus.

THE HISTORICAL NEGLECT OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

In the great tradition of theology as experiential knowledge of God, from Irenaeus and Origen in the second and third centuries A.D. through Gregory the Great (sixth century) and Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century) and on to Richard of St. Victor (twelfth century) and Bonaventure (thirteenth century), the Western church was educated in the contemplative, trinitarian tradition. But the first step towards the divorce of spirituality and theology occurred with the rise of Scholasticism in the late Middle Ages.³³ Whereas Gregory the Great had said, 'love is knowledge', Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) now distinguished the knowledge of God arising from love, as strictly different from proper theological science or Dogmatics. Then ensued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the distinguishing of topics of spiritual life from theology, as well as of their subdivision. Thus the normal struggles and disciplines of the ordinary Christian became known as 'Ascetical Theology', while the confessions of the penitent became known as 'Moral Theology'. The more elitist mystical experiences of 'The Religious' were now studied under 'Mystical P. 130 Theology'.³⁴ Meanwhile, morality itself could no longer be seen as a consequence of Dogmatic Theology, nor could Ascetical or Mystical theologies be given enough theological guidance to prevent them from degenerating into speculative and subjective areas of questionable pastoral value.

The Reformers therefore swept aside all these distinctions, and reconstructed theology as confessional and biblical. 'Practical Divinity' among the Puritans, 'Pastoral Theology' elsewhere, as well as 'Theological Ethics' later provided the role of spiritual guidance. But confusion remained as to the distinction between meditation and contemplation, with a bias towards verbal prayer and upon a mentally alert style of meditation, rather than upon the loving gaze of the contemplative. Today, even prayer has little or no relevance in theological education, and seminary is often experienced as the place where students have lost their desire to be daily exercised in prayer. Now, fortunately, a change is taking place. The heightened self-consciousness of the barrenness of a busy life is challenging many of us to question our spiritual needs. We are becoming aware of our need for a holistic Christian consciousness, rather than just having an intellectual frame of mind with which to entertain a Christian worldview. Indeed, the rationalistic approach, together with the imperialism of propositionalism, is now generally viewed as too reductionistic to support and nurture the faith and life of the contemporary Christian. As Pascal said it long ago: 'the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of'.

THE RECOVERY OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

³² *Ibid*, p.58.

³³ Roch Kereszky, 'Theology and spirituality: the task of a synthesis', *Communio*, winter 1983, p. 314–331.

³⁴ P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washburn, 1922), p.v.

Plainly then, as evangelicals, we need to teach personally the theology of Christian experience as it is grounded in biblical truth and sound doctrine. It has a pastoral intent. On the other hand Dogmatics deals with the theology of Christian beliefs and tends towards more of an apologetic stance as it defends those beliefs in dialogue with an unbelieving world. Nevertheless, there cannot be a neat separation of Dogmatics from Spiritual Theology. Indeed, as Newton Flew has observed: 'I would rather say that the *Theologia Dogmatica* of the future may be built on the *Theologia Spiritualis* of the past'.³⁵ Perhaps the secular wastelands of today and tomorrow need to be replenished **P. 131** by the spiritual gardens of past traditions. Certainly, different traditions of spirituality do exist, and learning from them does enrich us today. Just as A.W. Tozer was renewed by the medieval mystics, and Charles Spurgeon and many since were renewed by the Puritans, so the contemporary resurgence of interest in the early Cistercians is inspiring many others today.

But even more necessary than historical enrichment, is a recovery of trinitarian spirituality. The great majority of Christians today are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. Devout Christians will argue, 'But is the doctrine of the Trinity really taught in the New Testament?' Karl Rahner, the modern Roman Catholic scholar, has argued that: 'should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged'.³⁶ For many believers, the doctrine of the Trinity remains an isolated item in the total dogmatic system of thought. So the Trinity does not play a vital and central role in many Christians' thought and practice. But when it does, it brings a new vitality and inner conviction of living truth that is transforming indeed. Then it gives new force to the declaration that 'in him we live, and move, and have our being; and without him we can do nothing'.

For the God of the Bible is not a Greek deity, metaphysically static, passive, impersonal and distant. He is Immanuel, God-with-us. Therefore the revelation of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit requires of us a wholly living, personal response, rather than a merely cognitive and theoretical framework of truth. Christ's claim to be 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life', when taken seriously upsets our descriptive and informative styles of teaching, for that is the nature of the personal God. He is alive, loving and interpenetrating. Indeed, in the Incarnation, the perfect communion of the divine and human in Jesus Christ, is expressive of the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, a term that John Damascene first used to refer to the intratrinitarian life and relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As this Greek term was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, it was given added significance. In the twelfth century it was translated as *circumincessio*, of the divine life in one another, and then a century later there appeared *circuminsessio*, of being in one another. Such then is the nature of the divine life given to us, of 'the things that pertain to life and godliness' ([2 Pet 1:3](#)). There is a threefold *perichoresis*: of the Trinity, of God in himself; of the Incarnation, of God in human form; of the **p. 132** *Ecclesia* or Church, of God in the midst of his people. Thus the *koinonia* or fellowship of God's people is the outward sign of the inward life of the Holy Trinity. Abstraction of thought knows nothing of this divine fellowship, and that is why it is only what it is: abstraction!³⁷

The recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in personal and communal life is thus the key to the vitality of Spiritual Theology. The scholarly revival of patristic studies is one

³⁵ Quoted by Gordon S. Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1983), p. 361–362.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. by Joseph Donceel (London: Burns & Oats, 1970), p. 1011.

³⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (London: Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 271–272.

reason for this renewed theological interest in the Trinity, since the Greek and Latin Fathers were so vitally concerned with the mystery of the Trinity. Major theological changes in Catholic theology after Vatican II, notably the documents of *Lumen Gentium* are a second reason.³⁸ More interest in Orthodox theology, especially of such theologians as Vladimir Lossky,³⁹ is a third reason. The cultural concern for being human and personal in an inhuman and impersonal world has also generated a focus upon the personalness of God.⁴⁰ Finally, the challenge of pluralism and the denial of the uniqueness of Christ and of his atoning death, has forced the defence of apologetics to a more vigorous trinitarian stance.

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS TRINITARIAN

If Christian belief then, is centred on the Trinity, why is it that there is still resistance to seeing it as vital for our faith? We have already noted the objection that the New Testament does not seem to give and teach a developed doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps it does not do so in order to expose man to the mysterious life of God and to effect a way of knowing him that is intrinsic to his own character and not human ways of thought, in reconciliation, obedience and eternal fellowship. So the human traditions of 'doing theology' have all had their own weaknesses in grappling with the mystery of God for they remain human systems of thought, whether in Greek or Latin, East or West. Traditionally, theologians have made the distinction between the 'economic Trinity' and the 'immanent Trinity'. The former expresses the functional life of God, of what he 'does' as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The focus is upon the manifestation of the Trinity in the **P. 133** history of salvation. This has been much more the bias of thought in the Western church, because of the enormous influence of Augustine, who considers first the one essence of God, and then proceeds to explain how the One God is also 'triune', in a unity of deity that consists of Three Persons.⁴¹ This habit of mind lends itself to discussing the attributes of deity, his Essence, as Greek philosophers themselves argued about. Perhaps this is why our western philosophical style of theology has readily opened the way for non-Christian theologians, since the eighteenth century, to enter into theological debate. It is not an approach that sufficiently acknowledges humanity's intellectual inadequacy when probing the mystery of the Trinity and the ineffability of God. Rather Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, the theological 'giants' since Augustine, have been expressive and descriptive of God's reality, not silent and awe-struck.

In contradistinction, the Eastern Fathers have been more concerned to relate to the 'immanent Trinity', that is to the Three 'Hypostases' or Persons who are relationally One God. Thus the word 'triadic' is used of God, and not just three in unity. The Orthodox tradition of theology considers then the personalness of the Three Persons of the Trinity first of all, rather than the One Essence of Divinity. So we offer ourselves first to personal encounter with God as the immediate response to him, whereas Augustine, by starting with God's oneness, tended to explain the Three Persons in human terms and analogies. Today, this Eastern theological approach has much attraction to our impersonal culture,

³⁸ John J. O'Connell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

³⁹ See for example, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (N.Y.: St. Vladimir Press, 1976).

⁴⁰ Colin Gunton, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ I have developed this theme in my essay, 'Spirituality and the Trinity', in *Christ in our Place*, edited by Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1989), p. 48–69.

with its intellectual bankruptcy. Knowing God personally, then, is the first experience we can have of God, by the indwelling of his gracious Spirit, given us by Christ. In other words, it is God alone who by his triune Being enables us to know him. But as for his Essence, it is mystery all, so that we can only speak 'negatively' of what he is not in human terms.⁴²

Unfortunately, both traditions of theology have been infected with their own forms of scholasticism, so today in the intermingling of both traditions, deeper theological discernment is required of us.⁴³ Nor will it do for us to flatten the distinctives of God's 'economic Trinity' and of his 'immanent Trinity' in the way that Karl Rahner and other modern p. 134 theologians are now doing, even though it is wondrous indeed to see how God's character is expressive of his way of salvation for man. So we have to hold in balance these two truths, emphasised respectively by the western and the eastern traditions, that God is both revealable, and that God is also relational.

Divine Revelation is God's self-communication to us of his own nature. For the Trinity is not a human postulate, not some logical conclusion we come to see, as a deduction we make from Scripture. Rather it is experienced in faith as God's revelation of himself, of his own Triunity, as the Revealer, the Revelation, and the Revealedness of God.⁴⁴ Then the divine Being, the Word, and the Act of God are interpreted together as one whole, integrated unity. For knowledge of God is through God, and in God alone. This destroys the traditional model of a God revealing certain proper truths about himself, that in fact betrays a disjunction between the nature of God himself, and what, and how, truth is communicated to us as 'propositions'. This latter falsifies the nature of the God who reveals himself, allowing a mere intellectualism to become a substitute for the Divine Revealer himself. For he is the Revelation. Rather than, trinitarian theology recognizes that God, by his Spirit, gives embodiment in Jesus Christ to the truth. The revelation of God is then the enabling also to interpret the revelation given to us.⁴⁵ The revelation of God's Word is identical with God. So wherever there is divine revelation, there is also the revealing of God's presence.

Divine relationship is likewise God's presence with us. John Zizioulas, in his thoughtful study *Being as Communion*⁴⁶, has noted the revolution of thought between the Greek philosophers and the early Fathers of the church. The latter insisted that God is infinitely personal. 'The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would be impossible to speak of the being of God'.⁴⁷ The consequence of this is that 'nothing exists as an individual, conceivable in itself. Communion is an ontological category'. 'To be' and 'to be in relationship' become then identical.⁴⁸ God as Three persons thus constitutes the nature of the Godhead. To say with the p. 135 apostle, 'God is love' ([1 John 4:16](#)), signifies that God subsists as Trinity, where love is given, love is received, and love is shared. Indeed, love is God's mode of being. Again, the relational character of God, as in his revelational character, forces us to break from our own impersonal modes of

⁴² Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: an Introduction* (Cresswood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 31-35.

⁴³ See Gordon Watson, 'The Filioque-Opportunity for debate?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41, pp. 313-330.

⁴⁴ A statement of Karl Barth quoted by Ian Torrance, 'Does God Suffer?', *Christ in our Place*, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

⁴⁵ Eberhard Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T, Clark, 1976), p. 15.

⁴⁶ John D. Zizioulas, *Being in Communion* (Cresswood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), p. 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

thought and action, that so naturally control our view of reality. 'I' was born then, not with the Cartesian frame of mind that 'I think, therefore I am'. No, argues Von Balthasar, it was when love smiled upon my birth, itself ideally an expression of love, that 'I' became an 'I', when I-responded-to-that-love.⁴⁹ The growth then of personhood is the growth in communion.

It is vital then, to appreciate that it is this trinitarian doctrine of God that invites us into his world, so to speak. Revelation then is not an arbitrary act on God's behalf, but a participation-in and a belonging-to an order of life that both precedes and transcends our natural apprehension.⁵⁰ The newness of divine revelation is that it introduces into our life the love and grace of God, in forgiveness and empowering, so that we also are called to represent his Son in the world. Likewise, it is only the trinitarian reality of his relational being that could ever give rise to the reality of persons, and to bring about the realization of community. For 'the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' are what give new birth to man, to be persons-in-communion. The church then is the *koinonia*, that is built upon and expressive of this union and communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus Christ prays for his people, 'that they may be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us' ([John 17:21](#)).

Spiritual Theology then, is engaged in spelling out this revelational and relational reality in our ordinary lives. It teaches that man's nature can only have an authentic existence in the Trinity. It means then that God is the source of *all truth*. 'For grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' ([John 1:17](#)). For we have now 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' ([Gal 1:2](#)). It means also that the Father is the basis of *all true personhood*, for he is 'the Father of whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' ([Eph 3:15](#)). It means that God is the basis of *all true fellowship*. 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may also have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and the Son' ([1 John 1:3](#)). It means then that human identity is neither [p. 136](#) individualistic, nor is it conformist. For God is three distinct Persons, yet Each-is-For-the-Other. So that 'no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' ([Matt 11:27](#)).

Yet the doctrine of the Trinity would also *centre human life in the act of obedience to God*. It is so of Jesus Christ. 'I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me' ([John 6:38](#)). 'I do always the things that please him' ([John 8:29](#)). The Son's mission is one of obedience, prompted by the Spirit's presence. It is then, 'in obedience unto death, even the death of the cross' that the human life of Christ opens for us the cruciform life to follow. Faith then, for the Christian, is not merely an intellectual act, but an existential surrender of the whole person, to which the apostle exhorts us 'to offer your whole bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship' ([Rom 12:1](#)). Knowing the truth that is in Christ Jesus is much more than theological scholasticism can ever experience, for it involves participation in the death and resurrection of Christ ([Phil 3:10–11](#)). These then, are exemplary truths that we cannot teach so much as exemplify, in our whole manner of life. Personal life for the Christian then, is 'kenotic', as self-emptying, as Christ has given us the example to follow him.

In the establishment of this Chair in Spiritual Theology, it is my prayer that its reputation for teaching will always lie enfolded 'in the strong name of the Trinity'. May its

⁴⁹ John O'Donnell, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar, the form of his theology', *Communio*, Fall, 1989, p. 458–474.

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology*, 2:3, 1986, p. 197–211.

primary function in teaching Christian doctrine be regulative rather than merely descriptive. May its teaching be in every area of our ordinary human existence and experience, to live in relation to God. In other words, its primary role should be that we are taught and encouraged to pray. But clearly then, in the measure to which we are *less than persons*, to that measure we shall go on being *prayerless*.⁵¹

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS CHRISTOCENTRIC

The trinitarian grammar we have attempted to spell out, however, requires utterance. Jesus Christ is that incarnate utterance of God, enacted in space and time. For Jesus was a particular man in a particular place as a particular person. He has spoken and lived out the realities of trinitarian life before the world. So trinitarian spirituality is not merely descriptive of some ideal, and remains as a spectator of its **P. 137** abstractions. As Nicholas Lash has pointed out, we can indulge in ‘the flight into feeling’, in the cultivation of our own private oases in the deserts of life as well as exercise ‘the flight into thought’, in seeking for comprehensive explanation.⁵² No, our ministry is to see lives changed concretely so that our teaching makes a difference in personal existence. This is why, then, Jesus Christ is the focus of our ministry. For ‘the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power’ ([1 Cor 4:20](#)). Our challenge then is to ‘Live out the Gospel’, as our dear colleague Klaus Bockmuehl has exhorted us.⁵³

May I select then *three* areas in which Christcentredness will help us to live out the Gospel.

The *first* is to see ‘Christ in all the Scriptures’. Biblical scholarship, whether in the third century with Origen, or in the twelfth century with Bernard of Clairvaux, or the sixteenth century with Luther and Calvin, has used all the resources of the time—philological, historical, cultural, scientific—to express the literal exegesis. They have used the rich range of literary genres in Scripture to express the fullness of the Word of God to all of life. But the accusation has often been made, especially of the early Fathers, that when they did not understand—nor had the exegetical tools to understand literally—they escaped by studying it spiritually. Perhaps the accusation fits the other foot today. We understand so literally that we have little spiritual dimension in our exegetical skills.⁵⁴ There is a scriptural basis for spiritual exegesis, for it is the New Testament that practices it upon the Old Testament. Firstly, this is done in the use of symbolic language, with a kinship between the use of symbol in the two Testaments. One is glad to see the renewed interest in symbolic language in contemporary theological scholarship. Then there is the use of narrative for didactic purposes, the latter needing to be uncovered to get at the spiritual meaning. John’s gospel excels in this, though the synoptics also use it deliberately. Then again there is the reference to events in the history of God’s chosen people that are re-interpreted in the New Testament in the light of Christ’s advent, for example, [1 Cor 10:11](#), or [2 Cor 3:6–18](#). Thus ‘spiritual’ exegetes often quote the passage of [1 Cor 2:13](#), ‘comparing the spiritual to the spiritual’.

⁵¹ This is the inference behind my book, *The Transforming Friendship: A Guide to Prayer* (Oxford: Lion, 1989).

⁵² Nicholas Lash, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

⁵³ Klaus Bockmuehl, *Living the Gospel*.

⁵⁴ See the fine study of H. Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A.S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 73–84, on spiritual exegesis.

But the main theological justification of spiritual exegesis is the revelation identified with Christ's Incarnation. As the Johannine p. 138 writings emphasize, Christ is the *Logos*, The Word of God. And the Word became man in order to translate his image into a human person, into human acts and deeds. The Word then is expressive of the *whole* life of the incarnate *Logos*. To be sure, we cannot return and imitate fully the ways each of the great spiritual theologians did their spiritual exegesis. But what is impressive is the key role this played in their own contemporary vitality to communicate Christ in their generation—Christ in all the Scriptures. The recurrent danger is, of course, that we mix and interact spiritual with speculative. So 'there is need' repeats Origen many times in his writings, 'for those who prophesy and for those who hear the prophets; and no-one can rightly hear a prophet, unless the same Spirit bestows on him the capacity of apprehending his words.'⁵⁵ True 'enthusiasm' is experienced (*en theos*, in God); it is the feeling within one that God is there, just as the hearts of the disciples on the Emmaus Road burned within them as Christ expounded the meaning of Scripture. It would be a worthwhile study then to examine in the lives of great spiritual theologians how this keynote of their exegetical power convinced them of the centrality of Christ in Scripture.

A *second* Christocentric focus of Spiritual Theology is the cultivation of the contemplative life. Explaining the Bible as one would any secular book is only a necessary first stage of exegesis. But what gives the Christian his 'daily bread' is the association of spiritual exegesis with the cultivation of the contemplative life. If the purpose of man's creation is 'sabbath rest', then to 'find rest in God alone' ([Ps 62:1, 5](#)) is an orientation for the spiritual man. Christ invites us to enter into that rest in him ([Matt 11:28-30](#)). Clearly, it is the rest of satisfied love, yet desire also for a deeper exploration of divine love. It is in this contemplative tradition we have the well-known Latin hymn translated by Ray Palmer:

Jesu, Thou joy of loving hearts
Thou fount of life, Thou light of men
From the best bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

A deep devotion to Christ has marked the lives of God's saints, as it has been expressive of the great devotional literature, especially of the Middle Ages. How truly men and women have had their prayer answered, 'Thy Kingdom come', wherever and whenever devotion to Christ has been real and sustained. Unfortunately, the discipline of p. 139 contemplation is largely a lost art in the activism of modern evangelical life, that needs to be profoundly renewed. Only when we read the devotional literature of the past, do we realize how much we need to regain. We shall not be convincing witnesses of Jesus, the Man who lives today, until we have become more contemplative persons.

A *third* Christocentric focus in Spiritual Theology must be the whole theme of embodiment. Psychosomatic illness, sexual issues, emotional addictions, the relations between inherited temperament and acquired personalities, generational issues in family life, all manifest the interactions of body and spirit. The place of discipline and ascetic practices has played a prominent part in the nature of spiritual life, by seeing the place of the body in the life of the soul. There is much for us to explore and study, as well as to practise and embody. Clearly, it is again a Christ-centred life that enters deeply into the experience of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', that we need. For surely Christian grace is the embodiment of divine love, manifest in human life. This dynamic, transforming life is therefore also developmental. So we need to be increasingly aware of the Christian life

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

as expressive of the personal stages of development, as writers such as James Fowler have begun to do. So far from ignoring the body in the Christian life, previous generations considered it too much, though often negatively. Today, new prominence is being given to the human body but often in association with the disavowal of asceticism as being psychologically sick. So there is much confusion about the practice of asceticism *per se*, that we cannot afford to ignore.

We too confuse things, as Christians, when we do not distinguish our body from what Paul calls 'our flesh', that is 'flesh' in a theological sense. True ascetic practice, as Margaret Miles has pointed out, is a struggle for more life through strengthening the Spirit's energizing control of the whole of life.⁵⁶ We feel the bondage of what deadens us, and seek for the freedom of the children of God to be 'truly alive'. Issues such as celibacy, then, create still much emotional, as well as theological, confusion in the Catholic Church. Feminism also contributes further hurt and misunderstanding when the whole issue of sexism is misunderstood.

Perhaps we may add that a Christ-focused education in Spiritual Theology will require us to return to a more personal nature and less of the mass audience approach to teaching. In the Old Testament, judges, priests and then prophets were living sources of Yahweh's word ([Deut 17:8-13](#)). The wise statesman was the spiritual guide of his p. 140 people. The 'good' king embodied virtue in himself, so that his personal behaviour was a living model of how the kingdom should be governed. Even in Greek antiquity, the philosopher as a spiritual guide or *paedagogos* was *kathegetes*, 'one who leads, who shows the way'. The spiritual renewal associated with the Desert Fathers modeled their interpretation of discipleship upon the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, as an oral tradition. But first with the medieval copyists, then with the further removal of teacher and pupil by the printing press, and now with the electronic age, the removals from exemplary teaching have been intensified. The ideal for theological education must still be that of a personal relationship between teacher and student.

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS SPIRIT-LIVED

If then the revelation of God's truth is seen to be redemptive of relationships, and not so informative and programmatic as our western culture has made it, then we still need to probe in what ways is Spiritual Theology 'spiritual'? Clearly the New Testament indicates several aspects of what is 'spiritual'. It may designate the superhuman world of spirits and demons, 'hosts' of wickedness that we need to discern as sources of confusion and evil in the world ([Eph 6:12](#)). Wise discernment would guard us from too much preoccupation with this kind of spirituality. The ability to discern and distinguish 'spirits' remains a vital task of the Christian ([1 Cor 12:10](#)), but even the elitist pursuit of insight can also be abused as it appeared to be in the Corinthian church ([1 Cor 8:2](#)). Likewise, excessive valuation of 'tongues speaking' as evidence of charism was a Corinthian trait that strikes a contemporary chord ([1 Cor 14:2](#)). The charismatic frustration of desire for God, that truly is prayer, in 'groans' too deep for words ([Rom 8:26](#)) is perhaps the more genuine cause for the spiritual hunger of contemporary Christians. For the loss of true transcendence in our secular spirit, and its rationalistic bankruptcy are forcing us to repent and be renewed by the Holy Spirit. For we live with an exhausted evangelicalism.

Implicit in what the New Testament teaches about what is 'spiritual' is that it is *divinely given*. It is that which is brought into being, or transformed by the presence of the Spirit of God. The greatest gift of all is God's gift 'of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' ([Rom](#)

⁵⁶ Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

[6:23](#)). Gratitude for ‘his inexpressible gift’ ([2 Cor 9:1](#)) is then a true mark of the Spirit. Brokenness of our natural independence is then the vital necessity of being true ‘charismatics’, receivers of God’s gracious Spirit. So we rejoice in seeing the Charismatic movement as the [p. 141](#) opening of the door to the deepening need of our contemporary church to the experience of a richer, fuller spirituality. But it needs to enlarge also into a deeper trine spirituality, as Thomas A. Smail has written in *The Forgotten Father*,⁵⁷ so that we discern what truly are ‘spiritual gifts’. As we begin to recognize in ourselves that our so-called natural gifts may often be expressive of emotional addictions, we may begin to recognize also that ‘spiritual gifts’ are more reflective of the apostle’s experience that ‘when I am weak, then am I made strong’ ([2 Cor 12:10](#)). It is this transformation by God’s gracious Spirit that gives us true maturity and stability of character ([Gal 6:1](#); [1 Cor 2:15; 3:1](#)). Clearly then, Spiritual Theology is committed to the nurture of spiritual character, in the gift of grace, in the transformation of weakness, and in the commitment to sacrificial living, that is obedient to God’s will.

It is also implicit in New Testament teaching on what is ‘spiritual’ that the Christian life is *divinely directed*. In the deepening of human consciousness, with the contemporary stress upon inward exploration of the human psyche, modern man is encountering new forms of confusion and personal, emotional difficulties. So more than ever spiritual discernment is needed in the church. ‘The ability to distinguish between spirits’ ([1 Cor 12:10](#)), requires instruction and guidance that traditionally the Fathers of the Church saw as the role of the ‘Abba’ or ‘spiritual father’. Yet with the absence of the confessional in the Protestant world, contemporary evangelicals have few insights and experience to teach troubled souls. A great need then in theological education today is for Spirit-filled persons to warn the immature against the pitfalls of the inner life, knowing how to deal with what we loosely call ‘emotional problems’, deep-seated as they are. For if ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ ([Gal 5:22f.](#)) is the outcome of the Spirit’s presence in our lives, then his presence also implies growth to maturity of character.

Finally, it is implicit in biblical teaching that what is ‘spiritual’ is that *God himself is personally experienced*. In [Acts 19:24f](#) we read of Apollos ‘a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John’. As Paul then taught about the ‘baptism of Jesus’ in [Acts 20:1–7](#), Apollos, and others like him, then received the personal experience of God, for ‘the Holy Spirit came on them’. To experience the Holy Spirit then is to be able to personally experience God as ‘Abba, Father’, so that ‘the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God’ ([Rom 8:15–16](#)). It is truly ‘the spirit of sonship’. This is [p. 142](#) a joyous possession, that takes from us our natural cynicism and despair and delivers us from our natural egotism. To experience the Holy Spirit is also to acclaim the sovereignty of Christ as enthroned in our hearts, ‘for no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit’ ([1 Cor 12:3](#)). This is indeed an on-going experiencing of Christcentredness that never ends. It requires the daily companionship of our divine Paraclete, who will, as Jesus promised the disciples ‘teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you’ ([John 14:26](#)). As the Holy Spirit helps us to enter into the knowledge of God, into the very depths of his own trine being, we begin to see life as having infinite light in all its transparency, and also as love, infinite in its possibilities of personal relationships.

⁵⁷ Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

As the poet George Herbert lived out the simplicity of a domestic spirituality that relates us to God in all of life, he could describe prayer as ‘heaven in ordinary’.⁵⁸ It is that ‘godliness with contentment’ that the apostle appraises as ‘great gain’. The saints can afford to remain ‘home-spun’, when they live with the sufficiency of Christ. Perhaps, then, it is the cultural alienation of our times that would compensate by the extraordinary and the dramatic in life, precisely because of its estrangement from God. But the saints have always known that the personal experience of God brings simplicity to life. After all, we need no perspiration if we have inspiration. May then Spiritual Theology, as the Kingdom of God in daily life, and therefore in ordinary life, not be simply the teaching of one discipline but be the whole character of Regent College, now, and in the days to come. For ideally, ‘theology’ should not need any other description to be ‘spiritual’.

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What is Spiritual Exegesis?

Gerhard Maier

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‘We are in a phase of slackness’, says Jean-François Lyotard when he answers the question ‘What is postmodern?’—which was addressed to Thomas E. Carroll (1982)—as he speaks generally of ‘tendencies of the times’.

Is such a kind of slackness the reason that especially the methodical work of exegesis is seen as ineffective in our generation? That linguistic discoveries in a certain verse aA in relation to verse bB of the same verse is not seen as that exciting? That we surprisingly realize in analyzing our own sermons how few historical and philological papers or other special theological insights have been helpful? Is it such a kind of slackness that creates the clamour for spiritual exegesis, for something that is really life-giving? May be—but whether you answer this question with yes or no—one thing is sure, there is a new and deep longing for a better and more lively handling of the biblical texts and the understanding is becoming stronger that exegesis is not only or perhaps in a low degree—an explanation of the past but also—and perhaps even much more—the illumination of the future. The biblical statements are in a certain sense each and all future statements rather than processes of literature which are wearisome and limited to the past.

To quote one of the hermeneutic basics of the NT: All this is ‘written down for us on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come’. ([1 Cor 10:11](#)) How deep the discomfort has become with continually more specialized (and with that continually more mute) methods of exegesis shall be illustrated by an article of *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (1990).

⁵⁸ See Noel-Dermont O’Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, IL: 1979).

It refers to a review of the first volume of François Bovon's commentary on Luke which was published in *Ev.Kath. Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* in 1989. It is a review of Josef Ernst from Paderborn and starts with the provocative question: 'Is it still worth writing commentaries today?' It leads to the same basic consideration: Once again, I want to bring up the basic issue: 'Is it still worth writing commentaries today?' It has been asked with good reason whether the common historical-critical commentaries which set their heart on subtle hypotheses of discerning sources and which illuminate the text with a 1000-watt lamp up to the farthest corner can fulfil their task. I have read this commentary from the very beginning to the last page [p. 144](#) and I asked myself: Who besides a couple of specialists profits from this collected edition of historical, religious-historical and linguistical information and brilliant hypothesis on the history of origins and the literary structure etc? What is the spiritual and historical profit? Now, we have arrived at the subject. Has the commentary of the future not to be different from the common ones which work more or less in the same pattern? To my mind, the spiritual dimension of God's word should be more thoroughly worked out.

Precision work in the science of literature is good and important but it is only a kind of preparation. The great classics of the patristics or the theological commentaries of a Martin Luther and of the other reformers which can still be read with great profit are still exemplary. One could add some modern outsiders, who have realized what is the point in exegesis of the Bible. The method of a depth psychological exegesis indicates very clearly, despite all the methodological problems, that more is required than just the scalpel of the historical and literary critic. If the expression of Karl Rahner that the Christian of the future has to be a mystic (unless he wants to be one) is correct, then the hermeneutical reflection and with that the explanation of the New Testament as well has to go in this direction.

Without dealing with the whole content of this review a basic thought should be emphasized: The awakening and strengthening of spiritual life in the church and in every believer has unfortunately been laid aside. But it has to be considered within the scientific work, kept in view, and in accordance with the intentions of the biblical message put on the pedestal—that is: it has to be desired. The intention of this lecture is to outline some ways in this direction. In order to make the survey easier to understand, I choose the form of theses.

FIRST THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE IS NOT ONLY A FUTURE-PROJECT BUT IT IS ALREADY A WIDELY ACCEPTED FACT

There is almost no sermon which doesn't aim at the strengthening or the change of religious life. In this respect it is in the fullest sense 'spiritual exegesis of Scripture'. It is evident to every observer of the situation in the church that biblical texts are often being actualized with wild determination and even without any regard for the context, and spiritualized in a certain sense in opposition to the orthodox exegesis (that means the common exegesis which is taught at universities), sometimes even against the results of exegesis. The widespread use of the slogan 'swords into ploughshares' is a well-known example ([Isaiah 2:4](#)). Here the context is often totally neglected and a political and [P. 145](#) catching slogan is attended to which doesn't want to know of a preceding conversion and a preceding restoration of the messianic kingdom.

And there is a third area: Churches and different kinds of fellowships use a huge amount of devotional literature with a partly strong impact which makes biblical statements productive for life next week—and in this sense may very well be called spiritual exegesis.

But—and this turns the fact into a problem—there are no bridges (or just a few) which lead from the various efforts of a spiritual exegesis of scripture to the orthodox scientific exegesis with its huge philological and historical apparatus. In a way a further exegetical market has been established.

The reference to scientific obligation and integrity on the one hand and to spiritual quality on the other did separate the first market from the second and *vice versa*.

Are we supposed to leave this situation as it is?

SECOND THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS SEEKS TO COMPREHEND THE WORD OF THE LIVING GOD FOR US AND FOR TODAY

Three main characteristics of spiritual exegesis are mentioned by this thesis—three features which lead to a definition of spiritual exegesis.

By this it is presupposed a godly person uses the biblical text as a transmission channel of his will. The human authors are in no way unimportant but of secondary importance. Primarily, there is the understanding that there is a living God. i.e. God speaks and acts especially by his speaking.

To say it with Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* (1657): ‘The God of the Christians is a God of love and comfort. He is a God who lets them deep inside feel their misery and His infinite mercy, who joins them at the base of their soul and fills them with humbleness, joy, trust and love, who makes them unable not to aim at Him ... That is what knowing God as a Christian means’. We seek to put the insight (understanding) in effect that the Bible is a place where we can meet God, a means of communication and not a reference-book of human ideas of faith. Secondly it refers to a comprehension of the intention of the biblical message, that the message is for us ([1 Cor 10:11](#)). The exegete, the listener, the fellowship and the church are supposed to be influenced in their comprehensive behaviour and if necessary changed dramatically. These statements—one cannot stress it too much—want to create a future and not only make the processes of history understandable. Recently, Eduard Lohse has formulated in a lecture of p. 146 commemoration on ‘Theology as exegesis of scripture’ for Hans Conzelmann, ‘The task of New Testament studies is to explain the New Testament as a document of history with the means and methods of historical research’. This statement attempts too little. It narrows New Testament studies to historical investigation, it urges it backwards to explain things of the past and it misses the character of encounter with the Bible by which God wants to prepare further encounters with him—and not only with history—in order to talk personally to me. If we seek to listen to the word for us, then we are in the area which can be described in biblical-historical exegesis as dynamic and ethical understanding.

Thirdly, we have to make clear for ourselves that the Bible is different from, for instance, the annals of an oriental people. From the beginning it is a wrong effort if we fill up the *garstigen Graben* (vile gap) of history from the standpoint of the present time in order to make ourselves coincide with people of that time. Instead, we ought to realize texts were intended by the real author to speak and to have an effect for today. That the biblical message became Scripture means that God’s addressing is always a present addressing. Summing it up: a spiritual exegesis is an exegesis where the biblical message is heard as the voice of the living God, where the life of the hearer is changed, and where it is related to present time and future.

THIRD THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS LIVES UPON THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE INTERPRETATION WHICH IS PLACED IN THE TEXT

This is a very decisive point. In the first instance it is necessary to make a negative definition. It is wrong, in my opinion, to continue the long discussion about *sensus literalis* and *sensus spiritulalis*.

Of course, I am convinced there is a *sensus spiritulalis* in distinction to a *sensus literalis*. But I want to work out a different point. That is the fact that the biblical texts are built in structure upon two foundation pillars: fact and interpretation. If someone reads a biblical text he reads *eo ipso* a certain interpretation. It depends just on the fact that the Bible tells historical events. And there is no account of history, no historical narrative which doesn't offer an interpretation of the facts lying within it. In order to give an example of an extreme case: let's imagine there is a simple index which just counts the wars of a certain age with dates and names on it. Even such an index contains a message, an interpretation: i.e. historiography mainly is historiography of wars respectively; wars are a main aspect of history, thus it is a highly provoking interpretation. One can say Herodotus, the 'father of [p. 147](#) history', wanted to show the conflict between mankind and the reigning powers of history, or Thucydides wanted to grasp the whole sense of what happened, or one can read in Livy that he wanted to remind the Roman people through examples of the historical task—historiography is always combined with interpretation.

Going back to the biblical texts. There is nothing else in spiritual exegesis than to apprehend the interpretations lying within the texts. In this respect, spiritual exegesis is an invitation to agree with these interpretations. So far, spiritual interpretation comes from simple hearing. It is the opposite to the process by which something is put over or put on the Bible. One can conceive this as a continuing recapitulation of the situation in [Luke 19:48](#): 'all the people hung on his words'.

FOURTH THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS PROSPERS ONLY IF IT REMAINS A CONTROLLED EXEGESIS

Besides the endangering by philosophy and politics ([Col 2:8](#)), exegesis has never suffered more than through wrong spiritual exegesis. We all know of the exegete's tendency always to read his own thoughts into the scripture. Everyone knows how the most fantastic theories had to be confirmed by so-called spiritual interpretation. Many associate such key terms as 'spiritual exegesis' with 'wild exegesis'. How can we stop this kind of 'wild exegesis'?

Generally speaking, exact hearing and accurate detection of the interpretation of the biblical message could sufficiently afford relief. But in our experience almost everyone claims to be exceptionally accurate and humble in his exegesis. Therefore it is recommended to look for a precise point of orientation. First I mention philological accuracy. Regarding both the facts and the interpretations, one is always to ask precisely: What is really written in that passage? This question not only proves helpful in answering criticism of the Bible but also against a wrong spirituality of exegesis. Secondly, we have to refer to the historical understanding of the Bible. I have the impression there is a kind of elimination of history going on in the secular as well as in the Christian environment. The frantic holding on to history as the only saving element of theological—scientific exegesis can only stimulate but not prevent the exodus. Nevertheless, all spiritual exegesis should be combined with historical exegesis.

What I want to aim at can be clarified by an example which is mentioned by François Lyotard in his 'memorandum on legitimacy'. The ethnic group of the Cashinava have a certain ritual by which the past is recounted. Lyotard describes it as follows: 'Each of the storytellers [p. 148](#) assures he has himself heard the story he tells. He has been a hearer of the story and its story-teller has been a listener before. Therefore the heroes are to be

their own story-tellers. The time ..., during which the action took place communicates without interruption with the time of the current story which describes the action.' That means the difference between past and present is eliminated by the act of narrating, the singular event made into a continuous recurrence. The current story-teller was present at that time when this or that happened. This is exactly against the sense of the Bible! The Bible tells of unique deeds of God, of definite answers to very particular people, of outlined happenings in a past time which certainly constitutes but is not today's history. That 'always heard' means a representation of the past which set aside the past itself. According to the Bible a single fact remains a fact before the present time, whereas the interpretation of the fact is especially intended for today. Thus the Bible urges us to distinguish between times. Maybe it is one of the greatest of modern heresies that we give up the distinction of times. Historical investigation of the Bible is needed in order to guarantee a true understanding of the Bible in the distinction of times, to work out the realities of unique history which is told in the Bible, and with that to protect spiritual exegesis from a slip into subjectivity and arbitrariness.

A third kind of control lies in the doctrine of the church. I think every exegete goes through a period in which he is allergic to the so called *analogia fidei*.

A particular consideration of understandings of former and present Christians functions as soundly and protectively, in particular if such understandings coincide with each other. Certainly the statement that dogmas and creeds can be criticized by the Bible whereas Scripture according to its character cannot be criticized is still valid. But spiritual exegesis can only remain sound if it remains a regardful exegesis, i.e. if it shows consideration for exegesis of other Christians of former and modern times.

It is supposed to be an exegesis for the common good ([1 Cor 12:7](#)), or to say it with Emmanuel Levinas, it ought to be a responsibility 'for the other'. This cannot be without the other.

FIFTH THESIS: EXEGESIS CAN ONLY BE SPIRITUAL IF IT REMAINS CRITICAL OF THE 'SPIRIT OF THE AGE'

In the last thesis we talked about threats to spiritual exegesis. To these dangers which mainly threaten spiritual exegesis belongs the affinity to the *Zeitgeist*. That is quite normal since spiritual exegesis wants to be God's voice for us and for today (second thesis). If someone looks at [P. 149](#) himself and at the present time he never sees himself abstractly but only in a combination of circumstances. The acceptance of the *Zeitgeist* is motivated by two reasons. On one hand, it is missiologically motivated to get to people where they are in order to lead them sympathetically from their present standpoint to the Bible. On the other hand, there is the motive to speak God's will into one's own time so that people in their time get a concrete message and realize their responsibility.

Some examples may easily illustrate the danger which we are talking about. Günther Brakelmann showed how Protestant sermons in 1871 explained the foundation of the German empire as God's will in history, and the beginning of World War I as a campaign which the God of hosts was leading on the German side for the elimination of Western vices. When Herrman Dörries in 1934 wrote his booklet on German religion and the conversion of Saxony, which sold out and was published in 1935 in a second edition and where he—for that time—provokingly and courageously said: 'Germany's history is the history of Germany with Christianity', the influence of the current situation on choosing this theme didn't have to be explained to anybody. Today everybody knows that the reason why books, articles and sermons on the uniqueness of Christ are issued in quick Sequence is the current trend towards syncretism. Paul Knitter has openly stated in a

contribution to *Evangelische Theologie*, that if we want to avoid the nuclear holocaust and abandon the conditions of unbalance and injustice we have to form our world in a new manner, that religions are obliged mainly to contribute to the survival of mankind and that christendom has finally to abandon its demand for absolute truth.

Spiritual exegesis—whatever the historical situation—presupposes effective reflection of the influences of current cultural trends. It further presupposes that these trends are checked critically in the light of divine revelation. Where the voice of God says something different from the majority opinion—or the minority opinion as well—of our time, there God’s voice is supposed to prepare for resistance with a truly prophetic spirit. A kind of exegesis which a) fails to take account of the current situation, b) isn’t capable of critical analysis and c) doesn’t prepare for spiritual resistance if necessary cannot call itself ‘spiritual’.

SIXTH THESIS: IF SOMEONE WANTS TO PRACTICE SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS HE HAS TO FACE THE QUESTION OF HIS AUTHORITY

Scientific exegesis as it is usually understood has not to face the question of the exegete’s authority. It is within the scope of ‘right’ and **P.150** ‘wrong’. A totally nonchristian exegete can do it correctly and a very sincere Christian can do it wrongly.

Earlier we have *en passant* talked about the truly prophetic spirit of spiritual exegesis. Indeed, the one who works hard at spiritual exegesis comes close to a prophet, at least insofar as he is dependent on divine inspiration like a prophet. Without further ado one can say spiritual exegesis presupposes an inspired exegete, i.e. an exegete who is born again.

In common usage of speech one is inclined to go a step further and to demand godly authority for spiritual exegesis. However I don’t want to go so far. I want to emphasise that the exegete who wants deliberately to exegete spiritually inevitably has to face the question of his authority. Remember! not a question of authority which is abstract and generally ecclesiastical, but an absolute personal authority.

I recently read in a Christian journal: what does the best officially accepted doctrine help if it proves ineffective in leading the people of this church to be active disciples of Jesus and to a real fellowship? That is our problem exactly. It is not sufficient to go through with his exegesis, to have better arguments than others, to do the context and history, the integrity and the possibility of verification justice. No, if exegesis shows itself ineffective, if it swims along with the stream of time, if it doesn’t produce a decisive response, then the exegete is driven to the question: Do I have authority? That he is necessarily driven to this question characterizes his exegesis as spiritual.

SEVENTH THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS COMPLETES ITSELF IN THE PRACTICE OF OBEDIENCE

The current orthodox exegesis firstly wants to explain. Sociologically speaking it offers *information*. Biblically speaking it is a particular kind of Greek thinking which Paul formulates in [1 Cor 1:22](#): ‘Greeks look for wisdom’. Spiritual exegesis can’t be content with that. And for two reasons: a) The explaining-model fails to meet the function of communication of the Bible which can be newly realized today, b) It doesn’t agree with the biblical message which intends to create *obedience*. There is no doubt the biblical intention is not merely to change our *knowledge* but especially to change our practice. Exegesis which doesn’t create changes of *practice* in the lives of those addressed remains an unfinished bridge, an interrupted process. For instance Spener clearly has realized that

fact as well as Gustaf Stählin, and Emmanuel Levinas for the present time. It is interesting that Stählin as well as Spener have attached importance to the consequences of **P. 151** theological education. Thus Gustav Stählin wrote: 'All ... training and education has to be tied up within the work on the soul of the student. For, even if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul, it wouldn't be of any use. Therefore, the heart of a theological school is the Chapel, the place where the students are led to faith, worship and devotion by daily service'.

For me it is important again to keep in view the relation to the exegete. For only the one who listens obediently is able to exegete spiritually. Without his personal obedience his exegesis is going to be an empty shell, it loses its strength to lead to imitation of obedience. If Niklas Lahmann gives his opinion on theology of the present time: 'Theology doesn't—harshly said—offer religion', if he a little later asks: 'Isn't it important for the Christian religion to adhere to the reality of God's guidance which is taught and witnessed through Jesus?' then necessity comes up with these formulations and questions that we ourselves as exegetes are touched by the encounter and even by fellowship with God, to help our hearers to draw closer to Him. This getting close to God in fellowship can't be completed by knowledge alone. But it leads—to use this ambiguous word again—to obedience. According to Jesus' word and life, obedience alone is able to receive a genuine exegetical understanding ([John 7:17](#)). Thus, one could even clearly formulate: Obedience is the true method of spiritual exegesis.

Again and again we go back to the communicative basic structure of biblical-historical exegesis. The wheel comes full circle in again attaching importance to the encounter which the Bible serves. Because of the general character of 'meeting' one can guess what led Emmanuel Levinas to the confession: 'For me the things which are said don't count as much as the speaking. Speaking is not so much important because of its information content but because of the fact that it is addressed to a partner'.

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Evangelical Spirituality Reviewed

David Parker

*Printed with permission from Evangelical Quarterly 63:2 (1991)
(Abridged)*

1. INTRODUCTION

The current interest in retreats, the popularity of books on spiritual subjects and the search for spiritual directors confirms the view of Richard Lovelace that spirituality is now 'a growth industry'.¹ This is true even amongst evangelicals who in the past have generally been opposed to many of these practices because of their intimate association

¹ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1985), 15.

with Catholicism. But now evangelicals are just as likely as any other Christians to be found fasting, using meditation or enjoying liturgical worship.² This trend towards neo-monasticism is said to be a 'restoration of historic spirituality',³ re-discovery of values and practices from a tradition which earlier generations neglected to their own loss. But many of today's evangelicals, apparently with a more broad-minded outlook than some of their forebears, believing there is value in these practices, are determined to make up the deficiencies. They have also looked with interest on other spiritual traditions as well, including Quaker mysticism, the activism of Liberation Theology, 'health and wealth' teaching and the charismatic movement. They have also turned to the social and human sciences to gain insights from those areas.

It may well be the case that in the past, over-reaction has resulted in the loss of valuable practices. It should, of course, be remembered that movements such as the Reformation, Puritanism and Pietism (which have been the most influential in shaping evangelical spirituality), were meant to correct abuses, not to destroy valid and useful Christian practices or even to pioneer new forms of the faith. But in the enthusiasm for reform, worthwhile traditions may have been inadvertently rejected along with the undesirable, to the detriment of Protestantism as a whole. In these circumstances, it is argued, there is wisdom in evangelical spirituality strengthening itself by the revival of long neglected but still potentially useful disciplines.

But now there is the danger of allowing the pendulum to swing back too far in the opposite direction by de-emphasizing practices which p. 153 have served so well in the past, or by embracing uncritically elements from other traditions which may not be compatible with evangelicalism.

Several reasons may be advanced to explain why there is a noticeable trend among evangelicals to abandon such distinctive elements as the personal 'Quiet Time', the family altar, and 'Sabbath observance'.

For example, one possible reason is that while these practices may have had value in their time, they were too closely related to the period of their origin or development and were without substantial theological basis. Thus, they suffered greatly from changes in context, external pressures and internal fatigue and have therefore become irrelevant in the modern era.

Another possibility may be traced to the personal element—*viz.*, that evangelicals do not clearly understand their own spirituality, do not practice it diligently or find few good examples of it any more amongst themselves to use as models. In other words, they have lost confidence in their own historic traditions, and under the pressure of the modern secular world have been attracted by other disciplines which appear to have greater strength and resilience.⁴

Some of these difficulties may easily be overcome (at least in principle) by counselling, education and discipline. But there may also be more serious underlying causes which need attention. One such possibility is the existence of a fundamental confusion in the scheme of evangelical spirituality due to the imperfect integration of the various traditions contributed by its multiple historical sources. These are quite varied, including the Reformation, Puritanism, the Evangelical Revival, the Holiness Movement, the modern Pentecostal/Charismatic movement and Radical Discipleship. If these somewhat diverse

² E.g., see Bruce Wilson, 'Eresmos: Desert of Life' *Interchange* 40, 1986, 26–32.

³ R.E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978), 219

⁴ James Houston, 'Spirituality', W.A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (EDTh) (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984), 1046.

traditions are not fully appreciated or positively related to each other (as Lovelace indicates has been the case), it is not surprising that, when evangelical spirituality is subject to the kind of stress it is now facing, signs of weakness are revealed. This is even more likely to be the case because evangelical spirituality is often presented in a highly popularized and fragmented manner, subject to the idiosyncrasies of a variety of different exponents.

These factors need to be taken into account before evangelical spirituality is substantially modified, in favour of other systems. Hence there is value in carrying out a critical review of the existing practices to p. 154 bring out their essential structures and principles. Such a procedure would show the strengths and weaknesses of evangelical spirituality, and would serve as a basis for determining whether other traditions of spirituality were compatible with it, and how they might be employed to enrich it.⁵

EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY IDENTIFIED

1. Spirituality

The concept of 'evangelical spirituality' itself is perhaps the first problem, since it is not at all well developed or defined, at least in comparison with other traditions, such as the Roman Catholic with its rich treasury of explicit spiritual theology and discipline.

Even the concept of 'spirituality' is more difficult to define than might be anticipated. For example, Gordon Wakefield describes it as the 'attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them reach out towards supersensible realities'.⁶ Similarly, Geoffrey Wainwright speaks of it as 'existence before God and amid the created world'.⁷

These are general definitions, but Wainwright goes on to qualify the idea in more specifically Christian terms by adding, 'It is a praying and living in Jesus Christ. It is the human spirit being grasped, sustained and transformed by the Holy Spirit.' Similarly, Croucher notes that spirituality is that which 'concerns the life of God's Spirit within us'.⁸ One definition that takes spirituality in a narrow sense is found in *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*⁹, viz., 'Christian life lived with some intensity'. This seems to be somewhat elitist in tone, but it should be noted that such an attitude is not restricted to this source. Thus, James Houston describes spirituality as 'a state of deep relationship with God'.¹⁰ p. 155

Writing from an evangelical point of view, Robert Banks takes a much broader view when he refers to spirituality as

⁵ For a good example, see Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life*, 162, 195–200 (charts) where a fully integrated model of spirituality falling within the Reformed tradition is presented.

⁶ Gordon Wakefield, 'Spirituality', Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology (NDCTh)* (London, SCM, 1983), 539.

⁷ Geoffrey Wainwright, 'Christian Spirituality', Mircea Eliade (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, (New York, Macmillan, 1987) 3:452.

⁸ R. Croucher, *Recent Trends Among Evangelicals* (Sutherland, (Australia) Albatross, 1986), 58.

⁹ *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1967) 13:598.

¹⁰ James Houston, 'Spirituality', *EDTh*, 1046; see also Gordon Wakefield, 'Spirituality', *NDCTh*, 549.

the character and quality of our life with God, among fellow-Christians and in the world. This is primarily a work of the Spirit, though our own spirit is obviously drawn into it. But not only our spirit—also our minds, wills, imaginations, feelings and bodies.¹¹

As he points out, he is equating spirituality with the older and more familiar terms 'piety' and 'godliness'.

It is, therefore, clear that 'spirituality' is a broad concept including conscious and subconscious elements, and formal and informal aspects. It covers the state and condition of a person as well as attitudes, beliefs and practices. But it should not be defined so broadly that it loses its distinctiveness. For example, it is not the same as salvation, morality or sanctification, even though it is related to these.

R. Cant¹² sees it as a 'real, effective apprehension of Christian truth in the human consciousness.' It is to be noted, however, that in this case the word 'truth' cannot mean mere conceptual truth, as the Catholic term 'spiritual theology' might suggest, but the total experience of being a Christian. Thus Wainwright can speak of 'the combination of praying and living which is spirituality'.¹³ With this in mind, Balthasar's definition quoted by Cant may be more adequate than others:

the way a man understands his own ethically and religiously committed existence, and the way he acts and reacts habitually to this understanding.¹⁴

While traditions and practices of spirituality are affected by personal temperament and historical context, as Cant indicates, the importance of the underlying theological conceptions cannot be minimized. Despite the influence of other factors, ultimately it is the theology of salvation in particular that determines spirituality. Thus, the clear lines of Catholic sacramental theology are reflected in the unified spirituality of that church, whereas for Pietism, it is the concept of the divine [p. 156](#) image in humanity (*Imago Dei*) which is distinctive.¹⁵ Hence, typical Catholic treatment focuses on the religious life of sacraments and spiritual practices including set forms of prayer, the interior life and disciplines such as spiritual direction, meditations, retreats and fasting; Protestantism on the other hand concentrates on the personal appropriation of grace through faith. Thus Bouyer can emphasise that

... our spiritual life will be Catholic to the extent to which our personal relationship with God is developed in the Church. For the Word of God is spoken to us in the Church, and it is inseparable from the Church to the point that we cannot truly receive it except as it is communicated to us by the Church. If the Word of God is to be for us not a dead letter but a vivifying Spirit, it must be brought to our understanding in the living light of the

¹¹ Robert Banks, 'Home Churches and Spirituality', *Interchange* 40, 1986, 15.

¹² R. Cant, 'Spirituality', Alan Richardson (ed.), *Dictionary of Christian Theology (DCTh)* (London, SCM, 1969), 328.

¹³ C. Jones, G. Wainwright, E. Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality* (London, SPCK, 1986), 592.

¹⁴ *DCTh* 328. Questions may be raised, however, about his placing of the word 'ethical' before 'religious' and his gender specific language.

¹⁵ Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality* (Collegeville, Ma, Liturgical Press, 1961), 10–17, 105; Trond Enger, 'Pietism', Gordon Wakefield (ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality (DCS)* (London, SCM, 1983), 300.

magisterium of the Church. But, according to the golden phrase of Plus XI, the principal instrument of the ordinary magisterium of the Church is its liturgy.¹⁶

He contrasts this with Protestantism:

But Protestantism, insofar as it is opposed to Catholicism, only admits this present actuality as being wholly interiorized, and to that extent individualized ... Thus Protestantism tends to produce a spirituality which springs entirely from the co-presence and mutual relationship between the Person of God revealed in the Christ of the Gospels and the individual person of the believer.¹⁷

2. Evangelical Spirituality

If the use of the term 'spirituality' in the current context is comparatively recent even for Catholicism, it is quite an innovation for evangelicalism.¹⁸ But, as James Houston observes, even if interest in the concept is new for evangelicals, 'spirituality' is itself a familiar reality and a matter of great concern. It is, to use Houston's words, 'a deeply based consciousness.'¹⁹ It is presented as a strongly compelling ideal and a model to be realized in practice. So, to be a 'spiritually p. 157 minded' person, as distinct from the 'carnal' or 'worldly' person as taught in [1 Corinthians 2:14–3:3](#) is an honour, not because one is elevated to the level of an elite, but because one is living 'the normal Christian life' (to use a popular book title²⁰) which is the heritage and standard for all Christians by the presence of the risen Lord and by the power of the Spirit within. As J.O. Sanders states,

This is for every Christian in everyday life. It is the normal Christian life depicted ideally in the New Testament. Not reserved for a select few saintly souls, it is not for extraordinary conditions and circumstances.²¹

In practice, of course, 'the higher Christian life' is emphasized as a somewhat rare achievement.²²

Therefore, despite the peculiarities of terminology, the distinctive marks of evangelical spirituality, such as daily personal and family devotions, prayer meetings, Sunday observance, witnessing, holiness and surrender to the will of God in daily vocation, personal morality and Christian service, are clearly recognizable. They are tirelessly advocated by word and example, and have been transmitted from generation to generation just as effectively as those of classical Catholic spirituality, forming a more or less coherent and influential body of tradition.²³

¹⁶ L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 25.

¹⁷ L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 10, 11.

¹⁸ For the dating of the term, see 'Spirituality', in Sinclair Ferguson (ed.) *New Dictionary of Theology (NDTh)*, (Leicester and Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 1988), 656.

¹⁹ *EDTh*, 1046.

²⁰ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (London, Victory Press, 1957).

²¹ J. Oswald Sanders, *The Pursuit of the Holy* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1972), 93.

²² Compare the attitude within Catholicism: *NDCTh*, 549; L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 188ff.

²³ Michael Hennell, 'Evangelical Spirituality', *DCS*, 138–140.

While there is a wide variety of practice amongst evangelicals, there is unanimity on the view that spirituality is a 'living growing relationship between ourselves and God'²⁴ and that 'the test of Christian Spirituality is conformity of heart and life to the confession and character of Jesus as Lord'.²⁵ Thus there is an emphasis on grace, not the 'reaching out' by mankind to God as Wakefield suggested. With grace there is also a 'givenness' and a 'working out'²⁶ which accounts for the variety and ambiguities which exist.

The heavy emphasis found in evangelicalism on personal relationships with God means that there is a strong bias against tendencies that would result in reification or the invalid objectification of spiritual practice, e.g., there is a strong preference for praying to God, not p. 158 saying prayers; repenting before God, not doing penance; having fellowship with God through worship and Bible study, not listening to the service; preaching the Word, not giving a homily. Robert Banks sums this up by speaking of 'spirituality' as 'centring on the human spirit rather than the activity of God's Spirit within us and as emphasising self-orientated introspection at the expense of self-sacrificial conformity to God's will.'²⁷

Accordingly, for evangelicals, spirituality itself as a discipline to be studied, researched or practiced for its own sake is de-emphasized in favour of efforts to stimulate faith, devotion and love for God personally on the part of the believer.²⁸ This does not mean that matters such as prayer, worship and faith are not studied objectively, but the context and purpose of such study is distinctive. As Donald Bloesch notes,

Biblical faith does not deny the place for spiritual disciplines but stresses that those have no value apart from the secret inward work of the Holy Spirit, and they are designed to bring our actions into conformity ... with the will of God, which is perceptible only to the eyes of faith.²⁹

This is why evangelical spirituality prefers dynamic concepts such as holiness, holy living, godliness, walking with God and discipleship, because, as Houston notes, they emphasize

a formal commitment, a deepening relationship with Christ, and a life of personal obedience to the Word of God.

Yet he also acknowledges that

the decline of the sacred even among evangelical Christians and the deep penetration of secularism into every aspect of life are causing alarm and the need to reconsider devotion to Christ more seriously.³⁰

We can now propose an analysis of the principles of evangelical spirituality carried out in such a way as to reflect the distinctives of the evangelical theology of salvation.

²⁴ *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief* (Oxford, Lion Publishing, 1982), 377.

²⁵ *NDTh*, 657.

²⁶ *Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, 377.

²⁷ R. Banks, 'Home Churches and Spirituality', 14–15.

²⁸ *EDTh*, 1046.

²⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* vol. 2 (New York, Harper & Row, 1979), 64.

³⁰ *EDTh*, 1046.

According to its theology, Evangelicalism focuses on the Christian life as a personal relationship between the believer and God, through the indwelling, regenerating power of the Holy Spirit by virtue of the merits of Christ's atoning death and resurrection, appropriated by faith. p. 159 Thus, God's sanctifying power works within believers in a personal way to make them more godly. Therefore, believers enjoy an intimate personal fellowship with God, expressed in praise and prayer, and they receive guidance and spiritual power for daily life and witness. As a result they are to be totally surrendered to God's purposes and to live only for his glory.

Thus fellowship with God is direct and personal; it is not mediated indirectly by church, liturgy or sacrament. Such a fellowship is only possible because of the *Imago Dei* (the divine image), bestowed on mankind at creation, but lost (or marred) in the fall and now restored in Christ. As John Tiller notes, 'The essence of spirituality for all Christians, and certainly for evangelicals, is a matter of being 'conformed to the image of God's Son' ([Rom. 8:29](#)).'³¹ This highly distinctive feature of evangelicalism stems from its pietistic roots,³² and it places evangelical spirituality at the opposite end of the spectrum from the sacramental spirituality of Roman Catholicism which relies so heavily upon the church and the quasi-material idea of grace and its channels.³³ As L. Bouyer puts it when setting out the role of the sacraments in relation to the gospel and prayer, 'It is for the sacraments to apply to us this permanent presence and actuality of the Mystery.'³⁴

This helps to explain why evangelical spirituality has not developed a universal system of spiritual disciplines in the way Catholicism has. For evangelical spirituality, the system is more fluid because the focus is on the personal faith-relationship with God and on his glory, rather than the disciples *per se*, or even believers and their spiritual development. Thus it is open for every practitioner and spiritual guide to develop the basic principles in a way that seems appropriate to their own needs and context.

It also explains why evangelical spirituality places so much emphasis upon its distinctive elements—conversion, holiness (or spiritual mindedness) and Service. Humankind is oriented primarily towards God as a being created in the divine image and therefore made for fellowship with him. But this fellowship is not the normal or birth state, p. 160 due to the effects of the fall, or original sin.³⁵ Restoration of the divine image can only be achieved by a decisive divine/human act, referred to as conversion. Therefore, the indispensable starting point for Christian spirituality is conversion, whether it is an emotional, datable experience or not. This contrasts strongly with sacramental spirituality which takes all baptized people as already able to develop and grow in their spirituality.³⁶

³¹ John Tiller, *Puritan, Pietist and Pentecostalist: Three Types of Evangelical Spirituality* (Btamcote, Grove Books, 1982), 3. This same idea is found elsewhere in the NT—see [Colossians 3:10](#), [Romans 5:1–12](#).

³² DCS, 300.

³³ As Thomas Boland remarks, 'Roman Catholic religion is essentially sacramental, linking action with spiritual formation and the Christian life entered in Baptism and fostered in the Eucharist and other sacraments.' T. Boland, *James Duhiq* (St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1986), 212.

³⁴ Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 105

³⁵ David Parker, 'Original Sin: A study in Evangelical Theology', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, LXI:1, January 1989, 51–69.

³⁶ Cf. Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1982), 42, where he uses the term 'change of heart' to apply to baptized people.

Then, from conversion onwards, the Christian life is one of 'knowing God', walking by faith in harmony with his will, seeking his glory and serving his purpose. In common with other forms of spirituality, evangelicalism makes use of a variety of means to further these ends, whether it be prayer, pastoral guidance or witnessing through evangelism. But these means of grace are regarded in a fundamentally different manner in evangelical spirituality for they are strictly secondary to the ultimate end, rather than being of merit in themselves.

The Christian life itself is one of pilgrimage, with the believer walking humbly as an alien in this world, answering to the Lord from heaven, and looking towards the final hope which is the consummation of all in God's Eternal Kingdom. This spirituality is 'world-denying' in the sense that it does not credit this life and this world with ultimate autonomy. However, it is also 'world-affirming' in that it confesses that this world is God's creation and therefore not to be abused or ignored, but to be used carefully and sensitively for his glory. It also affirms that this world is the medium and context of salvation and Christian service, and is to be ultimately redeemed.

III. THE PRACTICE OF EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

These principles have been expressed by evangelicals in a wide variety of ways. However, this variety can be reduced to a simple pattern which reveals the essential structures of evangelical spirituality and serves as a basis for evaluating it.

1. Life

Perhaps the most basic of all spiritual disciplines for evangelicals has been the 'Quiet Time'—a private daily session of personal prayer and [p. 161](#) devotional reading of the Bible which is the means of knowing and hearing God, and receiving his guidance and power. Because of its importance for spiritual wellbeing, the Quiet Time has been regarded as indispensable, and accordingly has been advocated with almost monastic discipline. For example, in his advice to new Christians, Billy Graham wrote

In order to grow properly certain rules must be observed for good spiritual health. First, you should read your Bible daily ... If you fail to partake of daily spiritual nourishment, you will starve and lose your spiritual vitality ... Prayer combined with Bible study makes for a complete and glorious life.³⁷

The Quiet Time is closely linked to the Family Altar (the equivalent for the family group), the mid-week prayer and Bible study meeting (for the church) and more broadly, the sermon or other types of Bible teaching, whether at regular weekly worship or at special occasions like a convention.

The Quiet Time is based upon the concept of prayer as petition or intercession and as a channel of spiritual nourishment in which meditation, thanksgiving and praise are the means of drawing on the power of God. Another way of putting this is to say that in daily prayer the Christian is surrendering the will to Christ and by faith allowing Christ's life to indwell and live through the believer, in accordance with [Galatians 2:20](#), 'It is no longer I, but Christ.'

Prayer in the Quiet Time is typically private, silent and extempore. It is also often highly systematic using lists, guides and reminders extensively; books of devotional and inspirational readings are also employed.

³⁷ Billy Graham, *Peace with God* (Kingswood, The World's Work, 1954), 152–4.

The Quiet Time is also based on the Bible in its role as the Word of God which is able to build believers up in the faith ([Acts 20:32](#)), provide understanding of God and his ways, and serve as the main channel for discerning God's will and hearing his voice. This type of reading leads to and is supported by prayer, and is an evangelical equivalent of the *lectio divina* of classical spirituality.³⁸ A good example is the method of Bible reading promoted by the organization known as the Scripture Union (established 1867), which has branches in most parts of the world. It uses a roster of readings covering most of the Bible over a period of time (*lectio continua*) and a series of [p. 162](#) questions as a focus for meditation and action; printed notes at various levels of maturity are also available to assist in understanding and application.

This devotional use of Scripture is so universal and influential among evangelicals that it often causes problems for those nourished on it when they encounter critical biblical scholarship for the first time. The terms 'Bible teaching' and 'Bible study' are also apt to be most misleading since they do not imply conceptual or intellectual discourse, especially of a critical kind, but experiential knowledge, designed not for the stimulation of the mind or the building of a theological system, but for growth of spirituality. Thus competence in the scholarly study of Scripture is not a sufficient qualification for effective Bible teaching. Whatever its problems in these areas, this method of 'spiritual criticism'³⁹ has the potential to achieve what is now being sought by some critical scholars (and long advocated in some spiritual traditions), *viz.*, the integration of heart and mind.⁴⁰ However, traditional evangelical spirituality has difficulty in realizing this potential, at least on a popular level, because of unreconciled differences between excessive individualism and subjectivity on the one hand, and didactic legalism on the other.

2. Fellowship

The corporate aspects of some of these methods of nurture direct attention to the second group of spiritual practices, *viz.*, those associated with fellowship. Despite criticism that evangelical spirituality is excessively individualistic and introspective, the injunction of [Hebrews 10:25](#) about regular meeting together and the example of the early church in meeting in temple and home ([Acts 2:46](#)) have usually been taken seriously by evangelicals. Hence great importance is placed upon contact with other believers, especially attendance at worship services, local church activities, corporate prayer and occasions of public witness. This extends also to inter-denominational fellowship where particular interest is shown in such activities as missions, evangelism, Bible teaching and revival. Indeed, this extra dimension is often considered more important than denominational fellowship because it reflects in a unique manner the characteristic evangelical theology of the Church. [p. 163](#)

In its ecclesiology, evangelicalism rejects the Catholic doctrine of the Church with its liturgy, priesthood and sacraments as the divinely ordained institutional channel of grace. Instead, it teaches a derived efficacy for the church in its nature as the body of believers and hence the dwelling place of the risen Christ himself ([Matthew 18:20](#)). Thus believers meet with each other as the church to find spiritual strength and nurture from the presence of Christ in the Body, and they draw upon the grace of God through the

³⁸ L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 45; R. Croucher, 'Towards a Spirituality for Ministry', *GRID* (Melbourne, World Vision), Spring 1987.

³⁹ Arthur T. Pierson, *The Bible and Spiritual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1970 reprint).

⁴⁰ Canon Martin Thornton, 'Spirituality in the Modern World: II Meditation and Modern Biblical Study', *Expository Times* 89, 1977-8, 164-7.

ministries of those gifted persons whom God has set in the church. They meet also for mutual encouragement and corporate fellowship as members of the body of which Christ is the Head.

This is perhaps a more functional view of the Body of Christ than the mystical view of the Catholic and Orthodox, but it places just as great an importance on the Church. However, it is the invisible and universal Church, the body of all true believers wherever they may be found, which is the ultimate focus of attention, rather than the visible institutional Church in its denominational form. Accordingly, the evangelical finds a relatively greater significance in interdenominational fellowship (or non-denominational) compared with the purely denominational, for the latter depends finally on the doctrine of the visible Church. Ecumenical fellowship is even less important because its commitment to organizational unity is based upon the ultimate significance of the visible Church.⁴¹

It can also be noted that this emphasis upon the importance of the Church flows down to the family, where it accounts for the significance of family devotions and training of children in Christian teaching. The family is seen as the Church in miniature, giving to the parents, especially the fathers, the responsibility of leaders and pastors. In fact, the strength of the local church itself may be regarded as dependent on the strength of the families that comprise it rather than depending upon the hierarchy or the institution. p. 164

3. Christian Service

Evangelical spirituality teaches that believers function normally only as some regular and definite form of Christian witness is made a major focus of their lives. Thus, R.A. Torrey writes,

One of the most important conditions of growth and strength in the Christian life is work. No man can keep up his physical strength without exercise and no man can keep up his spiritual strength without spiritual exercise, i.e., without working for his Master. The working Christian is the happy Christian. The working Christian is the strong Christian.⁴²

The first principle involved is that of witness and confession of Christ ([Romans 10:9](#)) as a joyous expression or fruit ([John 15:16](#)) of saving faith (or even part of it—[James 2:17](#)), and as a response to grace. Just as important is the obligation laid upon Christians to be ‘ambassadors for Christ’ ([2 Cor. 5](#)) with the responsibility for bringing the message of the gospel to the world. Finally, there is the idea of believers as colabourers ([1 Cor. 3:9](#)) or at least obedient, grateful servants of God, stewards entrusted with the treasures of his grace and sharing in the extension of the Kingdom of God. Thus the ideal is sacrificial service, emulating that of Christ, not for merit toward salvation, but out of love, gratitude and obedience on the basis of the faith-union between believers and the Lord.⁴³

Thus new converts are urged to begin witnessing immediately by telling someone else about their ‘decision for Christ’. They are then advised to become actively involved in a

⁴¹ [T]he urge to unity can only be based on belief in a visible Church. Thus the whole Ecumenical Movement is instigated by the conviction that the Church about which we read in the NT must be in some sense identified with the visible, empirical Church as we know it.’ A.T. Hanson, ‘Invisible Church, Visible Church’, *DCTh* 174. Note that the word ‘ecumenical’ is used in this paper to refer especially to shared and cooperative activities which are based on or have in mind the idea of the ultimate organizational unification of the denominations on the grounds of the sinfulness of the existing divisions.

⁴² R.A. Torrey, *How to Succeed in the Christian Life* (London, Oliphants, 1955 reprint), 82.

⁴³ See also [Colossians 1:24](#).

church and to find other forms of Christian service. Most of all, able-bodied Christians are urged to consider seriously why they should not become full-time Christian workers (especially missionaries) who depend on God by faith for the provision of their financial and other needs.

This heavy emphasis on Christian work exacts considerable sacrifice in terms of personal interests, family life, careers and finances. Vast arrays of programmes, organisations and institutions have been set up at local church, denominational and interdenominational levels to carry it out. They range in type from evangelism, revivalism and missions, through Christian education, youth, women's and men's work to social concern, medical and welfare activities. Many of these organizations are small voluntary associations, depending upon the p. 165 spare-time help of their supporters, but others have become highly sophisticated national or international operations, with large, professional staffs.

In addition to the structured forms of Christian service, evangelicals are also expected to discharge their responsibilities for service and witness informally in the personal and family context, as well as in their social activities and occupations.

The sacrifice and dedication associated with this network of service is gladly offered, but the visible result is not always commensurate with the effort expended. There is often considerable overlap and inefficiency, while the motives may not always be entirely unmixed. Yet in its purest form, there is complete support for R.A. Torrey's observation,

Bearing fruit in bringing others to the Saviour is the purpose for which Jesus has chosen us and is one of the most important conditions of power in prayer ... Those who are full of activity in winning others to Christ are those who are full of joy in Christ Himself.⁴⁴

4. Discipline/Holiness

The final area is not focused on any one group of practices, but is concerned with the context, motivation and outcomes of Christian living generally. Working on the basis that the Christian life is supremely one of joyous and grateful dedication to God for his gift of salvation, evangelicals are taught to surrender themselves unreservedly to him and to remain 'unspotted by the world' ([James 1:27](#)). Hence, the Christian life involves an incessant spiritual warfare against the power of evil in the world, a continual struggle against temptation, and the practice of disciplines to counteract the weakness of the flesh.

There is some variety in the way this conflict is understood. Some see the war as winnable in this life and so speak of victorious Christian living as a result of 'mortification' (or renunciation) and the appropriation of the life of Christ within the believer,⁴⁵ or of 'entire sanctification'; others see the struggle continuing with great overt intensity until death, and therefore call for discipline, perseverance and training in godliness; yet again others speak of a decisive release or deliverance from the powers of evil by the direct intervention of God. p. 166

But whatever the interpretation,⁴⁶ there is constant need for vigilance, guidance and warnings in regard to spiritual exercises and active faith in God's power, lest one's own relationship with God be endangered or the standing of the whole body of believers be threatened. There is also regular need for forgiveness and reconciliation, cleansing and

⁴⁴ R.A. Torrey, *How to Succeed in the Christian Life*, 82-3.

⁴⁵ E.g., Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, 9.

⁴⁶ Donald L. Alexander (ed.), *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1988).

renewal to restore spiritual vitality after the skirmishes in this conflict. Provision must also be made for sanctions against those who reject or ignore the call to holiness.

This view of the nature of Christian living explains the need for the daily Quiet Time, corporate prayer, Bible study and fellowship with other believers in worship and service. Similarly, there is also an important role for pastoral guidance and the help to be gained from reading devotional, biographical and doctrinal literature. Practices such as these are designed to strengthen zeal for God and resistance to sin and evil, while pastoral counselling and occasions of surrender and confession through prayer or publicly in response to the preaching of the Word are means of reconciliation and renewal.

However, the principles which underlie these disciplines can easily be distorted or lost, with the result that the disciplines are practices out of mere tradition or for their own sake. In any case, an observer without a sympathetic personal understanding of them is likely to see only a rigid, authoritarian rule. Furthermore, this kind of discipline does tend strongly to generate a 'world denying' spirituality, although in recent times some are attracted to the view, expressed by such a prominent contemporary exponent as Thomas Merton, that 'by disengaging from the world .. [it is possible to] become more closely involved with it.'⁴⁷ But for many evangelicals, 'other worldliness' is the epitome of spirituality, and therefore they devote themselves wholeheartedly to this pursuit, in the confidence that the best they can do for the world is to bring it to a knowledge of God through their prayer and evangelistic witness.

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Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church: Prayer in the writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian

Andrea Sterk

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INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Christian tradition has never known any conflict, nor even made a sharp distinction, between theology and mysticism.¹ Indeed, the 'mystical' and 'experiential'

⁴⁷ LHC, 380.

¹ The term 'mystical' in Byzantine theology 'does not imply emotional individualism, but quite the opposite: a continuous communion with the Spirit who dwells in the whole Church. It implies as well the constant recognition of the inadequacies of the human intellect and of human language to express the fullness of truth, and the constant balancing of positive theological affirmations about God with the corrective of

nature of Byzantine theology has often been stressed; theology and the life of prayer are inextricably bound. Therefore, it is no mere coincidence that the Eastern Orthodox Church has reserved the title of ‘Theologian’ for only three sacred writers who are ‘mystically’ inclined: St. John, ‘the most ‘mystical’ of the four Evangelists’ St. Gregory Nazianzen, ‘writer of contemplative poetry’; and St. Symeon the New Theologian, ‘the singer of union with God’.²

The last of this trio, St. Symeon (949–1022), is little known to the Western church, to the great impoverishment of that tradition. Born in Asia Minor, Symeon was raised under the reign of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, during a time of peace, prosperity, and expansion of the Byzantine empire. Although prepared since childhood for a diplomatic career, Symeon longed to pursue the monastic life. He eventually became the abbot of a monastery where he laboured for twenty-five years to revive and reform monasticism. While having gained a reputation for sanctity and learning, Symeon’s mystical approach to theology brought him into an ongoing polemic that led to [p. 168](#) his exile in 1009. He remained in the small town of his exile—writing and guiding others—until his death in 1022.³

St. Symeon lived and wrote during a period of increasing religious formalism within the Byzantine world. Similar to the trend in the Western church of the period, a form of Byzantine scholasticism was emerging, tending to divorce theology from a conscious, living experience of faith in God. While Symeon’s writings were addressed primarily to monks, he believed he was called to lead both laity and monks into a life in the conscious presence of God through repentance, purity of heart, and constant prayer. He openly shared much of his own mystical experience, an uncommon practice among Byzantine mystics. In so doing, however, Symeon lies in the tradition of the best of the Greek Fathers, ‘the true “theologians”, who theologized out of their living experience of what is given in Scripture, namely, a consciousness of the indwelling Trinity’.⁴

THE HESYCHAST TRADITION OF PRAYER

Undergirding the Orthodox approach to prayer, the spiritual life, and, for that matter, all theology, is the notion of ‘theosis’ or deification. This concept was expressed by Athanasius in the oft-quoted statement, ‘God became man so that man may become God’. Some describe deification as a sharing in the divine life of the Holy Trinity, humans thereby becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’ ([2 Pet. 1:4](#)):

apophatic theology’, John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 14.

² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge & London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 9.

³ For more detailed biographical information, see George Maloney S.J., ‘Introduction’ in Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). See also Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986). This recent translation of a work on the life, spirituality, and doctrine of St. Symeon was not yet available at the time the present essay was written.

⁴ Maloney, ‘Introduction’, *Discourses*, p.4.

This participation takes man within the life of the three Divine Persons themselves, in the incessant circulation and overflowing of love which courses between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and which expresses the very nature of God.⁵

The Greek Fathers considered deification—becoming like God through union with him—to be the very purpose of the Incarnation and the aim of the believer’s life.⁶ While the fullness of ‘theosis’ awaits p. 169 an eschatological realization, participatory union with God in the present life is given as a foretaste of the glory to come.

For the Orthodox believer, it is via a pathway of contemplative prayer that one attains to union with God, to participation in the life of the Trinity. Prayer, then, is crucial to the life of faith; it is the means toward the ultimate goal in life. A certain approach to prayer, known as ‘hesychasm’,⁷ is generally associated with Orthodox spirituality. Unfortunately, ‘hesychasm’ has come to be much more narrowly defined than it ought. It tends to be identified with a well-defined method of prayer, involving a particular breathing technique for mental concentration, and the repeated recitation of the ‘Jesus Prayer’: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’. This system became highly codified in the monastic milieu of Mount Athos in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and was polemicized by the writings of the Athonite monk Gregory Palamas.⁸

The roots of the hesychast tradition, however, can be found much earlier. A hesychast approach to the spiritual life, emphasizing unceasing prayer and stillness of the heart before God, was recommended by spiritual writers of the patristic era, particularly the Desert Fathers. It was then more fully developed by the Sinaitic school of John of Climacus in the sixth and seventh centuries. In keeping with this broader understanding of the hesychast tradition, the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* defines hesychasm as follows:

... a spiritual system of essentially contemplative orientation which places the perfection of man in union with God through prayer or perpetual praying. But what characterizes it is specifically the affirmation of the excellence, indeed the necessity of hesychia, or quiet, in the broad sense, in order to attain this union .. a pure means ... of disposing the soul to seek God, by placing it in desired conditions.⁹

In the same article, hesychasm is described as both the climate for, and the emanation of, prayer. Four common traits of the hesychast tradition are distinguished: detachment, or freedom from passion; watchfulness, or guarding the heart; the remembrance or continual thought of God; and unceasing prayer.¹⁰ Others outline the three characteristic levels, or deepening degrees, of hesychast prayer, namely: oral prayer, mental prayer, and prayer of the heart. These p. 170 phases encompass a general progression from words to silence. They comprise what is known as an ‘apophatic’ approach to prayer, a negation of all words, images, and symbols of God in order to affirm in inward silence the ineffable

⁵ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p.22, cf. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 67.

⁶ For further discussion of ‘theosis’ or ‘deification’ in the Greek Fathers and other Byzantine writers, see Meyendorff, pp. 2–4; 159–165.

⁷ From the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning silence or stillness of heart.

⁸ Meyendorff, p. 76.

⁹ Pierre Adnes, ‘Hesychasme’, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Tome VII, Première Partie (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), p. 384, (author’s translation).

¹⁰ *Dictionnaire*, p. 389.

reality of who God is.¹¹ While there are differences of emphasis regarding the precise method or stages of hesychast or apophatic prayer, its aim is clearly to bring the one praying into personal encounter with God, to a union of love which surpasses verbal expression.

PRAYER IN SYMEON'S WRITINGS

St. Symeon himself makes no clear distinction between the various levels of prayer. In fact, he hardly uses the word 'hesychia' in his works.¹² Nevertheless, both Vladimir Lossky and the author of the *Dictionnaire* article on hesychasm place Symeon clearly within the hesychast tradition. They insist that his very variations from traditional formulations, his extremely personal style, and his doctrinal peculiarities, render him the founder of a neohesychasm. This is the explanation for the adjective 'New' attached to his title of 'Theologian'.¹³ Others point out that, as with most prophetic personalities, Symeon's views defy any attempt at rigid classification.¹⁴ This is certainly true of his writing on prayer. While his understanding of prayer emphasizes the essentially apophatic nature of theology and the spiritual life, characteristic of the Orthodox tradition as a whole, Symeon describes no clear-cut system of arriving at the desired goal. Rather, his writings reflect and support Kallistos Ware's contention that 'Prayer is a living relationship between persons, and personal relationships cannot be neatly classified'.¹⁵

The life of prayer permeates all of Symeon's works. His *Hymns of Divine Love*, a compilation of 58 metrical poems, overflow with his passionate love for Jesus Christ. Both the *Hymns* and his *Discourses*, a collection of teachings and exhortations to his monks, reveal the intimacy of his personal communion with God.¹⁶ Even Symeon's [p. 171](#) *Theological and Ethical Treatises*, which contain a fierce invective against the spread of abstract 'scholastic' theology in the Eastern church, expose the depth and centrality of his own prayer life.

While none of these works present well-defined instructions on how to pray or what to pray for, three themes in particular stand out and will form the basis of our discussion of Symeon's approach to prayer: repentance, progress in virtue, and union with God. These three themes are seen by many spiritual writers as a threefold pathway of prayer, or three progressive levels in the ascent to God.¹⁷ Symeon himself occasionally

¹¹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, 1979), pp. 162-168.

¹² In the critical, two-volume edition of Symeon's *Traité Théologiques et Ethiques*, only six references to the various forms of the word are cited.

¹³ *Dictionnaire*, p. 396.

¹⁴ Meyendorff, p. 74.

¹⁵ Ware, p. 142.

¹⁶ Maloney affirms that 'No Christian writer before Symeon, not even Saint Augustine, opened his own interior experience of Jesus Christ and the indwelling Trinity to a reading audience as does Symeon', 'Introduction', *Discourses*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Spiritual writers use a variety of terms and nuances in meaning to describe this threefold way. St. Dionysius the Areopagite, followed by many Western writers, distinguishes stages of purification, illumination, and union. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of light, cloud, and darkness, modeled on the life of Moses. Evagrius and St. Maximus the Confessor develop Origen's three-fold division: *praktiki* or practice of the virtues; *physiki* or the contemplation of nature; *theologia* or the contemplation of God himself. Ware, p. 141.

distinguishes the ways of ‘penitence’, ‘progress’, and ‘perfection’ in the spiritual life.¹⁸ However, Symeon is less systematic than many, and these three stages in the spiritual life, or, the life of prayer, ‘are not so much successive as simultaneous ... three deepening levels, interdependent, coexisting with each other’.¹⁹ Symeon also presents his own unique variations or emphases in each of these areas, but the themes themselves disclose an understanding of the nature and goal of prayer that is common to all spiritual writers in the Orthodox hesychast tradition.

1. REPENTANCE

While Symeon is one of the great charismatic figures in Christian spirituality—writing of visions and ecstasies, emphasizing the operations of the Spirit, even the necessity of a ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’—he certainly sees deep and constant repentance from sin as the foundation of all other spiritual experience and, indeed, of the whole of Christian life. Repentance is a dominant theme throughout Symeon’s writings. In fact, one cannot be truly conformed if one has not sincerely repented of sin, for, ‘how then can He exist in the soul **P. 172** which has not been completely purified and which has never reached the conscious awareness of repentance?’²⁰

Symeon describes repentance from sin as the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’. He even employs the same biblical texts that are commonly used in such discussions today (e.g., [John 3:5](#), [Acts 1:5](#), etc.). But, in contrast to many modern charismatic believers who emphasize the gift of tongues as the sign of that baptism, Symeon speaks of the ‘gift of tears’ as the mark of the Spirit’s baptism. When the Christian comes to be truly and deeply sorrowful for sin, the Holy Spirit will pour out a profusion of tears of penitence. While teaching on tears is hardly known today, and Symeon certainly emphasized it more than most, it was actually taught quite consistently by the Eastern Christian Fathers, especially by John Climacus.²¹ Symeon speaks of this gift both in his own experience and as a necessity for all Christians.

Symeon also provides some concrete instruction on how to repent.²² He himself uses and recommends the ‘Jesus Prayer’ as an example of penitent prayer, and directs his monks to the discourse of John Climacus, *On Penitence*,²³ for further instruction on methods of repentance. Symeon often proposes fasting as the ‘beginning’ or ‘foundation’ of every spiritual activity. He also stresses the use of the imagination in penitent prayer in order to concentrate one’s thoughts and to ‘Remember the foul deeds they [your hands] may have committed with fear’.²⁴ Always modeling what he teaches, Symeon, in his *Hymns*

Basil of Caesarea often distinguishes between beginners, progressors, and the perfect (e.g., *On the Holy Spirit*, 9), which seems to be more in keeping with Symeon’s tendency.

¹⁸ *Discourses*, XVII, 3, p. 207. Likewise, he mentions ‘those who begin ... those in the middle ... those at the end ...’ XX, 2, 232.

¹⁹ Ware, p. 143.

²⁰ *Hymns*, Hymn 55, p. 281.

²¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 205., cf. Mme, Lot-Borodine, ‘Le Mystère du ‘don des larmes’ dans l’Orient chrétien’, in *La Vie Spirituelle*, XLVIII, n. 3 (1936), pp. 65–110; L. Gillet, ‘The Gift of Tears’, in *Sobornost* (1937), pp. 5ff.

²² Cf. esp. *Discourse XXX*, ‘On Penitence’, pp. 318–328.

²³ *Discourses*, XXX, 6, pp. 321–322.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

of *Divine Love*, spares no detail in recounting and confessing the wickedness of his own offences against God. Sensitive to those who find it difficult to feel true penitence, he offers the following advice: 'Even though at the beginning you cannot say this from your soul, yet will you gradually come to this, as grace helps you ... merely begin to do and practice and say these things, and God will not forsake you!'²⁵

The major emphasis in Symeon's teaching on repentance is undoubtedly the need for fervency and perseverance in this endeavour. Unceasing repentance, and even daily shedding of tears over sin, is to be characteristic of the life of every Christian: p. 173

When your soul is pricked by compunction and gradually changed, it becomes a fountain flowing with rivers of tears and compunction. But if we make no effort thus to become clean, but prefer to continue in carelessness, idleness, and slackness, ... it will avail him nothing to have wept merely once. It is not this alone that at once purifies us and makes us worthy; it is mourning daily and without ceasing till death. The master himself enjoined us to do so when he said, 'Repent', and 'ask, seek, and find' ([Matt. 4:17](#), [7:7](#); [Luke 11:9](#)). How long? 'Till you receive', says He, 'till you find, till it is opened to you'.²⁶

Having obviously encountered opposition to his teaching that it is necessary for all to repent and weep daily, Symeon writes:

Let no one say that it is impossible to weep daily! He who says that it is impossible to repent every day subverts all the divine Scriptures ... For if you say that it is impossible daily to repent and to weep and shed tears, then how can you say that it is impossible for men who are subject to corruption ever to attain to humble mind, to rejoice at all times and pray without ceasing ([1 Thess. 5:17](#))?²⁷

Although Symeon clearly stresses spiritual warfare in prayer and the effort involved in maintaining an unceasingly penitent heart before God, he is also eager to speak of the rewards of repentance. He makes it clear that God hears and forgives those who truly repent.²⁸ He expresses that confidently time and time again, and effuses prayers of thankfulness to God for his great mercy and forgiveness. Confession of sin also results in great joy to the one who repents, for God 'will pour on him goodness and change his sorrow into joy ([Ps. 30:12](#)). He will change the bitterness of his heart into the sweetness of wine ...'²⁹ In addition to bringing forth forgiveness and joy, only repentance can purify the soul and enable the Christian to make progress in good works.

But most important, repentance is 'the gateway to the light', the crucial preparatory step on the pathway toward union with God, which is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life. Symeon never loses this larger perspective. Therefore, after graphically describing the depths of his own sinfulness, he marvels at the wonder of God's forgiveness:

... That which I am convinced of, O my God, is not the magnitude of offences ... nor the shame of the actions which will never exceed Your mercy ... which You pour out in abundance on those who offend You p. 174 and repent fervently; You purify them; You communicate Your divinity to them; You speak with them and converse with them, as to Your friends, Your true friends; O unbounded goodness, O inexpressible love!... Just as you

²⁵ *Discourses*, XXVI, 3, p. 277.

²⁶ *Discourses*, IV, 15, p. 87.

²⁷ *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 83.

²⁸ See, for example, *Discourses*, V, 8–10, pp. 98–100.

²⁹ *Discourses*, XXIII, 3, p. 256f.

received the prodigal and the sinful woman when they came up to You, receive me also, O Merciful One, I who repent from the bottom of my soul!³⁰

2. PROGRESS IN VIRTUE

Inextricably linked with repentance is the practice of virtues, for 'penitential sorrow disposes the virtues.'³¹ Keeping the commandments is the fruit of the truly purified life. This theme or stage of the spiritual life reveals the crucial connection between prayer and ethics in the Orthodox tradition. In Symeon's thought, prayer is clearly both the prerequisite to Christian action and a prominent part of Christian action itself. For Symeon, ecstasies and mystical experiences in prayer are clearly secondary to progress in godliness. In fact, the Spirit is sent 'to those who are poor in spirit in their way of living, to those who are pure of heart and of body ... who consider only the sole glory of the soul and the salvation of all their brothers' and who care not for human glory or earthly passions.³² Accordingly, the 'workings of the Spirit' ought not to be sought apart from faithful practice of the commandments.³³

Yet Symeon knows that he cannot attain to the virtues on his own strength, and he frequently prays for God's grace to live rightly: 'Deign, in the darkness of this life, in this world, in this place of misery, to permit me to serve You, to honour You well and to observe your holy commandments'.³⁴ He also calls others to pray for progress in holiness of life. Towards this end, he suggests the use of the Beatitudes. One ought to prayerfully consider each of the commandments in turn, examining one's own life in relation to each precept.

If we should find that we are fulfilling it, let us give thanks to God our Master and from henceforth observe it without fail. If, however, up till now we have forgotten it or failed to keep it, let us, I entreat you, run to embrace it and take hold of it ... Thus as we ascend the ladder by one step after another we shall arrive, as well I know, to the very city of heaven.³⁵
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Prayer is required not only for progress in virtue, but also as a virtuous act in itself. Symeon repeatedly calls Christians to intercede for others. He models this by fervent prayers on behalf of his monks. He recounts examples of the efficacy of intercession, especially on the part of his own spiritual guide. He speaks of the need to pray with 'tears', 'weeping', and 'groaning' for the salvation and well-being of friends, neighbours, and all people, but especially exhorts Christians to pray for their enemies. Combining his emphases on love ('the queen of the virtues'), good works, and prayer for enemies, Symeon often gives advice of this nature:

³⁰ *Hymn 17*, p. 61.

³¹ *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 83.

³² *Hymn 21*, p. 96.

³³ *Discourses*, XXII, 2, p. 244.

³⁴ *Hymn 2*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Discourses*, XXXI, 9, p.333.

If you love your enemies and all who hate you and if you pray exceedingly from the depths of your soul for those who calumniate you and if you do good to them as far as you can, you really have become like your Father above.³⁶

This double enjoinder—to ‘pray’ and ‘do good’—recurs appositionally throughout Symeon’s writings. The two appear to flow naturally out of a penitent heart and unceasing awareness of the presence of God. Herein, Symeon reflects one aspect of the Orthodox understanding of intercession, described as follows: ‘Once we recognize his [Christ’s] universal presence, all our acts of practical service to others become acts of prayer’.³⁷

Symeon sees the practice of virtue, like repentance, as part of a larger whole. Prayer on this level, too, should dispose the soul to apprehend and shine forth the divine light of God’s presence. Thus, while he speaks of ‘the works and sweat and the toils of virtue’,³⁸ both in fervent prayer and loving deeds, he also reminds us that ‘illumination is the infinite goal of every virtue’.³⁹ Therefore, he exhorts Christians to ‘do those things the Saviour commands you ... then you will see the light most brilliantly shining’.⁴⁰ The vision of God for which the Christian longs is given to the pure in heart. This should provide motivation to persevere and progress in the path of virtue.

3. UNION WITH GOD

The final stage in the spiritual life, that of union with God, represents the summit and ultimate goal of prayer. It is principally this stage of **P. 176** prayer that Symeon celebrates in his *Hymns of Divine Love*. The first two levels of prayer are sometimes termed the ‘active life’, while this last is called the ‘contemplative life’.⁴¹ It is ‘contemplative’ because it is beyond verbal expression, beyond mental images. This, then, is the apophatic prayer of the hesychast tradition.

In Symeon’s writings, participatory union with God—attained along a pathway of prayer, commencing with repentance and culminating in contemplation of the Godhead—is most often represented by a transforming vision of Divine Light: ‘God is light ([1 John 1:5](#)), and to those who have entered into union with Him He imparts His own brightness to the extent that they have been purified ... How great a marvel!’⁴² In various passages Symeon describes his own vision of this Light. In Hymn 25, for example, he recalls that he was meditating (seemingly on the Scriptures) when God appeared to him as Divine Light. Struck by his own wretchedness, he repents of his sins and worships God. He is then caught up into the light and becomes light himself. Elsewhere, speaking of himself in the third person, he describes his initial vision of the light in similar terms:

One day, as he stood and recited, ‘God, have mercy upon me, a sinner’ ([Luke 18:13](#)), uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance

³⁶ *Hymn* 40, p. 206. cf. *Hymn* 41, p. 211; *Hymn* 4, p. 24; *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 84 for other references to the need to pray for enemies.

³⁷ Ware, p. 161.

³⁸ *Discourses*, VI, 4, p. 122.

³⁹ *Discourses*, XXII, 6, p. 248.

⁴⁰ *Hymn*, p. 255.

⁴¹ Ware, p. 142.

⁴² *Discourses*, XIII, 3, p. 183.

appeared from above and filled all the room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him ... he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed himself to have turned into light. Oblivious of all the world he was filled with tears and with ineffable gladness.⁴³

While Symeon often speaks of such visions and the need to experience God as Light, he is careful to distinguish occasional ecstatic experiences from a conscious life in the light of God's presence, a life of constant communion with God. Ecstasies, though certainly valid, are given more for the benefit of beginners or novices in the spiritual life! Symeon contrasts their experience of the Light with that of those who are mature in the life of prayer. Of the perfect he writes:

When he has thus persevered for a time, he considers it [the light] little by little as familiar and as if in some way he has always been with it; ... p. 177 Thenceforth he is as if he were in the light, rather with the light, and not as in a continual ecstasy.⁴⁴

The one who has attained to this loving union with the Divine Light is changed. Symeon emphasizes the results of contemplative prayer, and its culmination in union with God, as much as the experience itself. One effect of having come to such an experiential knowledge of the Trinity is a heightened understanding or awareness of spiritual truth. Symeon particularly marvels at his realization of his own deified humanity. Having seen the Light, he exclaims:

He took upon Himself my flesh and he gave me His Spirit and I became also god by divine grace, a son of God but by adoption. O what dignity, what glory!... But by the divine adoption I see that I have become god and I become a participator of intangible things.⁴⁵

His writings abound with such joyful exclamations of the phrases 'a god by adoption', and 'a god by grace'. He tries to explain how the experience of union itself has brought about this new depth of insight into his own deification: 'I am entirely god by sharing in God in a conscious awareness and by knowledge, not by essence but by participation'.⁴⁶ If his explanations lack perspicuity, it is because of the essentially ineffable, apophatic nature of the vision of God, as Symeon himself repeatedly affirms.

Symeon's experience of the Light also engenders sharpened understanding of his own spiritual state. He explains that one who succeeds in contemplative prayer is no longer attracted by the pleasures of the world, understanding anew the fleetingness of such passions. Nonetheless, the struggle with the passions has not ended, for it is all too easy to lose sight of the Light if one fails to persevere in the practice of virtue. Nor does the need to repent cease once union with God has been attained. Here again Symeon has gained a keener perception of spiritual truth. Having ascended to the Light, he confesses, 'I received the certain knowledge of the forgiveness of my sins, yet I saw myself as a greater sinner than all other men'.⁴⁷ Such realizations attest to the fact that the various

⁴³ *Discourses*, XXII, 3, p. 245.

⁴⁴ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Traité Théologiques et Ethiques, Tome I, Sources Chrétiennes*, Vol. 122, ed. Jean Darrouzès (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1966), *Ethique I*, 424–435, pp. 303–304 (author's translation).

⁴⁵ *Hymn 25*, p. 136.

⁴⁶ *Hymn 50*, p. 254 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁷ *Discourses*, XVII, 2, p. 206.

levels or stages of prayer must constantly intermingle. One does not supersede the next. As Ware explains, 'Apophatic prayer coexists with cataphatic, and each strengthens the other. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are not alternatives; they are complementary'.⁴⁸

One of the greatest results of the vision of God is a new empowering to influence others in the life of prayer and holiness. In fact, the believer has no right and no authority by which to guide others if he or she has not attained to this vision. However, those who have been united with the Light become 'light' and 'salt' to others. This is graphically portrayed by Symeon's comparison of the true contemplative, the person who has seen and experienced God, with Moses.

May he also be like Moses, returning to the summit of the mountain and entering into the interior of the cloud until he disappears from the sight of all. He who will go that far will see God not only from the back, but will find himself knowingly face to face with Him, seeing nothing but God alone and being seen by Him; and hearing his voice he will be, first of all, initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, then he will dictate the laws to others; he will be illumined, then he will illumine others with the light of knowledge; he will be forgiven, and he in turn will forgive. It is this one who asks and receives; and having received, he distributes to those who ask of him; he is delivered from the bond of his evils, and in turn he himself delivers others.⁴⁹

Because of the surpassing joy and the incomparable benefits of participatory union with the Trinity through prayer, experienced as a vision of Divine Light, Symeon urges all Christians to seek this experience. As has been demonstrated, he does not separate the experience of union with God from the need for repentance and ongoing progress in virtue. However, he stresses the need for conscious, incessant awareness and experience of God's presence, This is what prayer is all about. Accordingly, Symeon upbraids those who deny the need for experience and contemplative knowledge of God. He particularly inveighs against certain theologians who do not understand because they have not experienced.⁵⁰ He poses a question in this regard that is fundamental to all his teaching on prayer: 'And how is it that one made god by grace and by adoption will not be god in awareness and knowledge and contemplation, he who has put on the Son of God?'⁵¹ For Symeon, to deny the validity or even the necessity of such experiential knowledge of God would be to undercut all of Christian theology. As Maloney has aptly stated, all of Symeon's p. 179 teaching (and certainly his understanding of prayer, must be viewed in light of the ultimate goal:

... the divinization of the individual Christian into a loving child of God, more and more consciously aware of the transforming love of the indwelling Trinity that makes him 'a god by adoption and grace',⁵²

CONCLUSION

⁴⁸ Ware, p. 163.

⁴⁹ *Traité, Tome II, Ethique, XV*, 61–70, p. 449 (author's translation).

⁵⁰ e.g. *Ethique, VI*, p. 133; *Hymn 21*, pp. 99.

⁵¹ *Hymn 50*, p. 254.

⁵² Maloney, 'Introduction', *Discourses*, p. 35.

An examination of the salient features of St. Symeon's understanding of prayer demonstrates that he stands within the hesychast tradition, in as much as hesychasm is used in its broader sense to describe the spiritual tradition of the whole Eastern church. The intensely personal quality of Symeon's writing distinguishes him from the majority of Eastern writers, as few others so openly expose the depths of their own soul. Symeon is also less systematic and precise than most hesychasts in his use of terminology. However, the themes that dominate his writing and his underlying apophatic approach to theology are characteristic of Orthodox spiritual writers. In short, 'Symeon stands for the basic understanding of Christianity as personal communion with, and vision of, God, a position which he shares with hesychasm and with the patristic tradition as a whole'.⁵³

Certainly Symeon holds some more unusual doctrinal variations. For example, it is difficult to see the Scriptural justification for a 'gift of tears' as the mark of the Spirit's baptism, or for tears as the *sine qua non* of true repentance. Regarding his visions of Light, however, one must affirm that the Bible abounds with such images to describe or express the presence of God. Lossky explains that 'In the mystical theology of the Eastern church, these expressions are not used as metaphors or as figures of speech, but as expressions for a real aspect of the Godhead ... It is both that which one perceives and that by which one perceives in mystical experience'.⁵⁴ Symeon's is far from a pantheistic or nirvana-like experience of light and union, but rather speaks of a positive and edifying encounter with a personal God:

In the experience of the divine light in St. Symeon's writings there is no trace of the depersonalizing ecstatic state, where human consciousness is lost in the contemplation of an impersonal God which renders the experience of His light inexpressible in human language.⁵⁵ p. 180

In conclusion, three questions may prove helpful in assessing Symeon's mystical theology of prayer and in considering mystical experience in general.⁵⁶ First, is to appeal to one's own mystical experience a valid norm for other Christians? For Symeon, the answer is both negative and affirmative. While he never demands that his own experience be explicitly duplicated (in fact, he himself finds it difficult to articulate), he does insist that Christians should indeed have a personal experience of God. As mentioned above, he denounces theologians who deny the necessity or even the validity of such experience. There can be no true theology, nor even true Christianity, without vital experiential knowledge of God.

A second question arises from Symeon's visions of God as light. How do visions of God differ from mere hallucinations? On what basis can one distinguish between them? At the very least, visions differ from hallucinations by the transformation of life which they effectuate. Symeon always relates true mystical experience to moral consequences. His visions lead to repentance and moral transformation. A true vision of the Light will dispel inner darkness and cause the Christian to shine forth the Divine Light in the world. One cannot see God and remain unchanged. For Symeon, mystical experience is never remote from the realm of ethics.

⁵³ Meyendorff, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 220.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Bedfordshire: The Faith Press, 1963), p. 119.

⁵⁶ I am indebted to Dr. James Houston for these insights.

A third question of importance concerns the role of the Scriptures in Symeon's understanding of the spiritual life. What is the relationship of personal communion with God to Scripture? Symeon's answer is clear, both in his teaching and in his own life. Just as true Christianity and true theology must be rooted in true experience of God, so must personal communion with God be firmly rooted in the Scriptures. Like the monks of the Western tradition, nurtured daily on the *lectio divina*, Symeon was devotionally devouring Scripture. His writing is saturated with Scripture, both direct quotations and biblical language and imagery. Indeed, for Symeon, there is no contemplative life without meditation on the Scriptures.

Perhaps of greatest significance in Symeon's writings is his very approach to prayer. Reflecting as he does the heritage of the Eastern church, with its distinct mentality and expressions of spirituality, Symeon uses categories in discussing prayer that differ from those that we in the West might employ. The Western tendency toward pragmatism drives the Christian to pose questions of a highly practical nature: How ought one to pray?, For what should one pray, and so on? The Eastern penchant toward idealism tends to lead to a different p. 181 set of questions on prayer. For the Eastern mind, the crucial issues are, rather, what is prayer?, or even more important, who is God? These are clearly the questions that occupied the mind of St. Symeon.

Symeon's approach to prayer sheds light on the essential unity in the Eastern Christian tradition—mentioned at the outset of this essay—between prayer and mysticism, on the one hand, and theology, on the other. Lossky's words in this regard are in perfect keeping with Symeon's own emphasis concerning the life of prayer: "To know God one must draw near to Him. No one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian."⁵⁷

In considering what the Western church might gain from St. Symeon the New Theologian—or, for that matter, from the whole Orthodox tradition—regarding the life of prayer, I was struck by the words of an Anglican writer toward the end of his own essay on St. Symeon. As he, too was grappling with questions concerning the relevance and application of Symeon's teaching on prayer, I quote, for the sake of reflection, what he calls his 'paradoxical suggestion':

What is necessary is not so much that we should take one or two hints from the East to solve our Western problems, adding a touch of exotic, Oriental colour to the familiar pattern of our Western Christianity. No, the requirement is greater than that. It is that we should be willing to let our whole way of posing the questions, our whole set of presuppositions be challenged by the radically different nature of the Eastern tradition. We should seek to place our questions in a new context, and let our perspectives be correspondingly transformed by a direct encounter with the reality of Orthodoxy. For here is another way of living, thinking and praying the mystery of the Gospel of Christ, a way which, for all its limitations ... seems to correspond to the complex nature of man, himself created in the image of the Triune God.⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ A.M. Allchin, *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge: The Encounter Between Orthodoxy and the West* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), p. 52.

Charles Simeon: Prince of Evangelicals

Arthur Bennett

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So much has been written about Charles Simeon by biographers, historians, and ecclesiologists that it may appear unnecessary to write more. But in dealing with his ministry, achievements and widespread influence, the spiritual principles that motivated his life and character may be largely by-passed. It is needful to ask, What made him the man and Christian he was as outstanding preacher, servant-leader of countless students, co-founder of missionary societies, voluminous correspondent, and counsellor of many who were in need? He counted amongst his close friends Henry Venn, John Berridge, Henry Thornton, John Newton of whose papers he was an executor, and William Wilberforce with whom he associated in emancipating the slaves. As Vice-Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and Minister of Holy Trinity Church in that city for fifty-four years, he became, in Constance Padwick's words, 'The strongest religious influence in England'.

Lord Macaulay went further. Writing to his sister in 1844, eight years after Simeon's death, he said: 'As to Simeon, if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, you would allow that his real sway in the Church was far greater than that of any Primate'. Eighty years ago, Sir Richard Temple claimed that: 'He was probably the greatest parish minister that ever adorned the Church of England ... though he has been dead many years (his influence) still radiates'. Evidence of this assessment in the modern age is to be seen in the spiritual outlook and ministry of Lord Donald Coggan who early in his Christian life fell under Simeon's spell. It was from him, writes Margaret Pawley, Coggan modelled his ministry. She notes that he was attracted to him as a Churchman, for his love of the scriptures, personal discipline, and the importance of preaching, evangelistic, and missionary strategy. It is therefore not too much to say that Coggan's episcopal work at Bradford and archiepiscopal tenures of York and Canterbury were done under the shadow of Charles Simeon.

The intention of this article is to make a new approach to Simeon by delineating the spiritual forces that animated his Christian outlook, [p. 183](#) utterances, and ministry and made him the 'Prince of Evangelicals'. But, first, a brief resumé of his life.

LIFE OF SIMEON

He was born at Reading in 1759 of middle-class parents, the youngest of four sons. His father was a formal churchman. Of his mother little is known. After Eton schooling he entered King's College, Cambridge, in 1779, where within a few months he passed through an intense religious conversion to an abiding faith in Christ who became to him his 'Adorable Saviour'. For three years he found no one to share his views until, having graduated and being made a Fellow of King's, he was ordained and became a voluntary curate at St. Edward's church, Cambridge where his preaching attracted great congregations. In November that year, 1782, at the age of twenty-three he was appointed minister of Holy Trinity Church where for ten years he faced much opposition from parishioners, disdain by college Fellows and Heads of Houses, and mockery from undergraduates. In 1786 Henry Venn wrote to Rowland Hill: 'He is rightly esteemed, and

exceedingly despised; almost adored by some, by others abhorred'. But his biblical preaching filled his church, and in time he was called to give thirty university sermons. His aim, he said, was to win souls, and to that end he itinerated in other parishes until advised against; but made four preaching tours in Scotland by invitation of leading Presbyterians.

His greatest and most lasting work was perhaps amongst students for whom he held Friday Tea Parties, Conversation Meetings, and Sermon Classes in his rooms. To enable poor scholars to enter university he formed the London Clerical Society, and for clergy and wives he kept regular Bible study and prayer meetings. He gathered his own church people into Societies under stewards, some members of which were made parish visitors. His social concern stimulated him to create a system of poor relief in villages around Cambridge, and to create a straw-plaiting industry for his own parishioners. One such at Leith, Scotland, that lasted many years, owed its origin to him. He was also closely associated in the founding and development of the Cambridge Providence Society.

In 1787 a letter from India relative to a mission to Calcutta opened a new field of activity that enabled him to seek out and send Chaplains to the East including Martyn, Corrie, Thomason, Dealtry, Wilson, and Buchanan. In 1799 Simeon became a founder-member of 'Africa and the East Mission' (now the C.M.S.), and was one of its first Honorary Governors for Life. He was associated with the rise of Home Societies [p. 184](#) such as that of the Bible Society; but above all he wholeheartedly supported the Jews' Society for which he formed auxiliaries and travelled far and wide to speak on its behalf. His desire that Anglican pulpits should be filled with godly evangelicals able to communicate the gospel led him to create the Simeon Trust in 1833 for placing such men in key centres. To help preachers he produced six hundred skeleton sermons, and before his death saw the production of twenty one volumes of his writings.

Although Simeon reached high positions at King's—Vice-Provost, Dean of Divinity, and of Arts—and his name was household, he was never elevated to any important Church office, but remained throughout his fifty four years' ministry at Holy Trinity a curate-in-charge. He died on November 13th 1836 and on the 19th was buried in King's College chapel where a simple grave slab marks the site. It is said that his funeral procession was greater than that of the Duke of Wellington. The once despised and scorned man was now honoured by the presence of 1500 gownsmen, choristers, the Vice-Provost, professors, graduates, and Fellows, the bells in all colleges tolling, and shops in the main streets closed. On the anniversary of his death a prayer in his memory is said in King's College Chapel, and his beloved Church of England has revered him by including in its Alternative Service Book the following words for 13th November: 'Charles Simeon, Pastor, Preacher, 1836'. Notwithstanding this, Charles Smyth could write, 'I doubt whether the genius of that man as an ecclesiastical statesman has ever received sufficient recognition'. He was, he continued, like a bottle-neck through which 'the main stream of traffic passed before it displayed itself upon the swelling plain of Victorian religion'.

It is singular that in literary recordings of Simeon's ministry and fecundity little sustained assessment has been made of his rich and deep spirituality, The following is offered as a catena of some of his spiritual insights and maxims in the hope that one, who has been called 'The Luther of Cambridge', may give guidelines on faith and action to modern evangelicals and the church at large, and encourage all ministers to be as true to Simeon's Saviour as was he.

SIMEON'S NEW LIFE

The source of his practical holiness lies in the depth of his sudden conversion to Christ as Redeemer and Saviour. It was an experience he often referred to in his utterances and writings. He had entered Cambridge loving horses, dancing, intoxicants and dress, on which he **P. 185** spent £50 a year, but with no vital personal religion. An order to him from the Provost, Dr. William Cooke, to attend mid-week Holy Communion first awakened his conscience to his sinful state and drove him to intense self-examination, fasting, prayer, and the reading of religious books. But in these his soul-agony found no relief. Envyng a dog's mortality, and thinking Satan was more fit to partake of the sacrament, he discovered Bishop Wilson's small book on Holy Communion and from it learned that Israelites transferred their sins to an offering. The effect was instantaneous. 'What, may I transfer all my guilt to another?' he said, 'Has God provided an offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer.' And so he did, that Passion Week of 1779, and on Easter Sunday awoke crying, 'Jesus Christ is risen to-day! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul; and at the Lord's Table in our Chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour'. Against the verse in his Bible, 'That thou mayest remember the day thou camest out of the land of Egypt all the days of thy life,' ([Deut. 16:3](#)) he wrote, 'So must I, and God helping me so will I, the Easter week and the Easter Sunday, when my deliverance was complete.' To the end of his life he kept Passion Week inviolate for prayer, Bible meditation and fasting, and partook of only one meagre meal a day.

Captivated by Christ he never lost the sense of his presence and Christian assurance throughout a long ministry. All that he afterwards became in godly living sprang from that time, and what he had experienced of saving grace he coveted for others, especially ministers of the gospel. He wrote: 'Let a sense of redeeming love occupy the soul, and the heart becomes enlarged, and the feet are set at liberty to run the race of God's commandments ... There is no other principle in the universe so powerful as the love of Christ; whilst that principle is in the heart, no commandments will ever be considered grievous'. It was a love that subdued his natural pugnacity, and became the nerveknot of his spirituality and the heart of his preaching. A dying Saviour on a cross became for him the hub of Christian truth, the reason for Christ's incarnation, the key to understanding the Bible, and the spring of holy living.

SIMEON'S CONCEPT OF THE CROSS

The cross was seen as the means both of redemption and sanctification. He fully grasped the truth that the soul's sinfulness that remains in the Christian is to be met only by application to the merits of Christ's **P. 186** death. Every day of his life, he admitted, he had to flee to the Saviour and plunge into his cleansing blood. In this sense, he said, 'Christianity is not a system but a remedy'. Further: 'My only hope is that there is a fountain open for sin and uncleanness, and that I am yet at liberty to wash in it.' The sense of cross-centredness as a present power to meet his soul's needs and take it along the godly road never left him. As to his preaching, he said in the sermon to mark his fifty years' ministry:

I can appeal to all who have ever known me that to proclaim a suffering and triumphant Messiah ... has been the one object of my life without any variation ... and without any turning aside after novelties; or fond conceits, or matters of doubtful disputation.

He saw an eternal virtue in the blood of Christ because of his Godhead, and sought its present power to ease conscience and cleanse the heart. The Christ he knew, he said, not

only loved and washed sinners from their sins but continues to love and wash them: 'I have a consciousness that I ought to lie at the foot of the cross, and I have a consciousness that I do'. No more so than when facing strong opposition in which he rejoiced from the thought that: 'Stones on the sea-shore lose their rough edges by rough friction'. At that time he placed his finger on the verse, 'They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his (Christ's) cross'. Applying the word Simon (Simeon) to himself as a word of encouragement he said: 'To have the cross laid upon me, that I might bear it after Jesus—what a privilege! It was enough. Now I could leap for joy as one whom Jesus was honouring with a participation of His sufferings ... Henceforth I bound it as a wreath of glory round my brow'. To Ellen Eliot, Henry Venn's daughter, he wrote, 'Only get your soul deeply and abidingly impressed with the doctrine of THE CROSS, ... and everything else will soon find its proper place in your system'.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

But Simeon never dissociated Christ's cross from the Holy Spirit and his work. By a strong Trinitarian belief derived from scripture he held that the Triune God was in the redeeming work at Calvary, the Father being reconciled by the offering there made, the Son who voluntarily made it, and the eternal Spirit through whom it was offered. Thus: 'Christ is ALL in procuring salvation for us, so the Holy Spirit is All in imparting it to us'. And again, the Spirit is 'the AGENT who applies to our soul all the blessings which Christ has purchased for us ... As Christ died for all, so does the Holy Spirit strive with all'. Out of this striving the soul, **P. 187** he held, is born again. For the Spirit: 'is not merely God in the universe displaying himself around us, or as God in His church declaring his will to us, or as God in our nature interposing for us, but as God in our hearts dwelling and operating within us'. It was his belief that: 'we must refer to Him the entire change wrought in us in the conversion of our souls to God'.

Simeon's mature thoughts on the Holy Spirit as co-equal and coeternal with the Father and the Son were set forth in four university sermons which he preached in 1831 when seventy-three years of age entitled, 'The Offices and Work of the Holy Spirit'. He argued that no one can belong to Christ unless the Spirit indwells them. But to 'have' the Spirit did not mean possessing the power of miracles and healings, for 'the time of such things is past'. Possibly having the French Prophets, the Shakers, and the Irvingites in mind he affirmed that: 'No such power exists at this day, except in the conceits of a few brain-sick enthusiasts'.

To him the gifts of the Spirit were nothing less than his graces by which the regenerated person is transformed into Christ-likeness. On being asked, 'What is a spiritual man?', he replied that he was one with 'a sense of his own sinfulness ... by an influence from above'. As the faithful indwelling Monitor he taught that the Spirit is Teacher, Sanctifier, Comforter, and Rectifier helping the believer to decide rightly on moral questions by being renewed in the spirit of his mind. 'If his operations do not produce holiness,' he said, 'as well as light and comfort, they are no better than a delusion, a desperate and fatal delusion.'

THE SCRIPTURES

Simeon grounded his faith, life, conduct, and ministry upon the integrity and authority of the Bible as God's ultimate and final revelation of himself. As to mankind he held: 'The only warrant for a sinner's hope is the written Word of God ... It is exclusively through the written word only that we are now authorised to expect His gracious instructions ... This

He applies to the heart, and makes effectual for the illumination and salvation of men'. Thus, the Scriptures are to be taken, 'with the simplicity of a little child ... not softening or palliating any point in it'. He learned by experience, he said:

The written Word is the medium by which the Spirit works and the standard by which His agency must be tried ... I do not therefore sit down to the perusal of scripture in order to impose a sense on the inspired writers, but to p. 188 receive one as they give it to me ... I wish to receive and inculcate every truth precisely in the way and to the extent it is set forth in the inspired volume.

Simeon doubted whether a person could be called a Christian if he did not read and pray over the Bible daily. But he must accept, he told a Parisian Duchess, that, 'Brokenness of heart is the key to the whole'. His own method was clear. In a letter to the Bishop of St. David's (Dr. Burgess) he wrote:

My mode of interpreting scripture is this. I bring to it no predilections whatever ... I never wish to find any particular truth in any particular passage. I am willing that every part of God's blessed word should speak exactly what it was intended to speak ... It is by coming to the Scriptures with this in mind that I have been led into the views which I maintain.

His aim, he told Thomason his curate-friend was, 'not only to enter into the spirit of it, but to BREATHE the spirit of it in my ministrations'.

SIMEON'S HOMILETIC METHODS

His preaching bore this out. To the vast numbers of people who heard him he was God's ambassador bringing to them biblical mandates prayed over, predigested, declared and applied. He favoured textual preaching rather than broad expositions of Scripture or topical subjects, as likely to settle truth on the mind, move the affections and stimulate the will. His aim was to give to the text: 'Its just meaning, its natural bearing, and its legitimate use'. But it must not be divorced from the context in order to buttress a preacher's pet theory. He held that the sermon must come from the text and be given: 'the true, faithful, and primary meaning, plainly, simply, understandingly, like the kernel out of a hazel nut; and not piecemeal like the kernel out of a walnut'. To prospective ordinands he counselled: 'Regard nothing but the mind of God in it. Let the text speak, and let the preacher be its mouthpiece'.

As to sermon content: 'There should be but one subject in every discourse, and that subject be the very mind of the Spirit ... I think that every sermon should have, like a telescope, but one object in the field'. It should come from a spiritual heart that lives upon the truths preached. The preacher must be also sensitive to the congregation, not judging it by those present who could endure strong meat, but bearing in mind those who would be choked by it. His leading principle was not what he could tell but what his people could receive. 'I desire no other office than to be a helper of their joy,' he said. To that end the p. 189 spring of a minister's action should be love: 'Always put love in the chair and give him a casting vote. If a man's heart is full of love he will rarely offend'. But such love could only be possessed by one who had close union with God.

SIMEON AT PRAYER

Simeon's spiritual life was fed by personal prayer for which he often arose at 4 a.m. When he changed his rooms he engaged in it on their eves. Prayer undergirded his utterances, friendships and ministry. His custom was to meet with his curate and a few others on

Sunday evening in his rooms for supper and spiritual devotion, a church dignitary once present being deeply moved by his closing prayers of humiliation and confession that 'our tears may be washed in the atoning blood of Christ'. He challenged others to pray, as in the second sermon preached to the infant Church Missionary Society in which he countered objections to overseas missions by pleading: 'Let all excuses be put away, and let all exert themselves at least in prayer to the great "Lord of the Harvest", and entreat Him day and night "to send forth labourers into His harvest".' He believed that church committees needed special prayer, because, 'as Cabinets their members are human and mistakes and errors will be made', but if there was more prayer God would better direct them.

His prayer intensity focused itself on those who opposed him, asked for his intercessions, or were unconverted. When slandered by a newspaper editor he answered, 'I will pray for him'. For his uncivil churchwardens who locked his church door against him he prayed: 'May God bless them with enlightening grace'. To an unknown correspondent he wrote that it was enough for him to hear from 'a fellow sinner in distress,' for he could then pray for him. He sometimes spent nights in prayer, and once interceded throughout a week for a friend in need. To John Venn he wrote: 'To my thanksgivings I added my poor prayers for still more rich and more abundant blessings that all which God has already done for you may be only the drops before the shower'. Believing in the power of prayer to soften the heart and open it to Christ, he told his brother John to pray to become a Christian. Often in company he would silently intercede for others, as once, when horse-riding, a young German agnostic came to him and asked why his lips were moving, and was met with the reply, 'I am praying for you my friend'. Subsequent conversation with Simeon led to his conversion.

He delighted in social prayer, and boldly introduced others to it, and [p. 190](#) wherever possible, as at Stapleford and on his Scottish tours, he created prayer circles, some continuing for many years. When Miles Atkinson, Vicar of St. Edward's Church, Cambridge, proposed a universal prayer session at 9 p.m. on Friday evenings for the nation then at war with France, Simeon gave it full support, and persuaded his friends likewise. In 1807 at a time of malevolent slander he wrote to Edward Edwards: 'Amidst all that I feel to mourn over, my soul rejoices exceedingly in God my Saviour. I trust that this joy will be made to abound more and more when you put your live coal to mine, and blow it with the breath of prayer'. Often knowing that he did not love an opposer as he should, he tried, he said, to put the dearest object of his affections in his place and pray for him.

Simeon grounded his prayer life on the majesty and sovereignty of God, for; 'With Him there is no weariness, nor any defect either of inclination or of power'. But he must be sought not only for help but, 'much more for the communications of His grace, and manifestations of His glory'. It was his abiding conviction that: 'A close walk with God is necessary for maintaining of fervour in intercession ... It is scarcely ever that we can intercede with fervour, unless we enjoy an habitual nearness to God'. To one who was ill he wrote that the seclusion would give her opportunity for: 'more intrinsic and abiding communion with your Lord ... My prayer to God for you is that you may have such abundant discoveries of his incomprehensible love, as may be more effectual to "fill you with all the fulness of God" '. In his view every attribute of God deserved 'all imaginable praise from his creature'. Above all he must be contemplated in his Son who should be praised for 'assuming our nature, and expiating our sins by His own blood upon the cross, and as becoming the living head of all His believing people'.

After the Bible, he rooted his spiritual life in the English Prayer Book of which he believed, 'No human work is so free from faults as it is'. But he would have been glad to have had a few blemishes removed. To those who criticized its set forms he answered: 'The deadness and formality experienced in the Church, arise far more from the low estate of our graces than from any defect in our Liturgy ... No prayers in the world could be better suited to our wants or more delightful to our souls'. Although he used its prayers privately, he confessed: 'Never do I find myself nearer to God than I often am in the reading desk'. He **P. 191** longed that those who used them should pray them as they were meant to be prayed, and not mouth them.

That which drew forth his affection for the Church's Prayer Book was the sin content that runs through its services. He loved the confession 'There is no health in us', as a reminder of his fallen nature, and never tired of using the Litany phrase, 'Have mercy upon us miserable sinners'. The notes of contrition, humility, and brokenness of heart emphasized in the services, together with the theme of redemption through the Saviour's blood were to Simeon: 'The religion that pervades the whole Liturgy, particularly the Communion service, and this makes the Liturgy inexpressively sweet to me'. Using the analogy of the Jewish Passover meal as God's act of redemption by means of shed blood, and the partaking of the Paschal Lamb, he held that the Lord's Supper to Christians 'makes known the end of Christ's death to all generations'. It is thus an 'instructive emblem ... a commemorative sign', testifying that the Redeemer has completed his saving work. There must therefore be an eating and drinking at the Communion to show affiance with Christ's death: 'It is by an actual fellowship with Christ in His death, and by that alone, that we can ever become partakers of the benefits it has procured for us'.

Simeon never lost the sense of Christ's reality in the ordinance that he had found at the time of his conversion. He advised others to 'get just views of the ordinance, realise the great truths declared in it (and) look forward to the feast prepared in heaven'. But he rejected the belief that attendance at the Supper could recommend a person to God, for: 'It is Christ alone that can save us, not the ACT of praying or the ACT of communicating at the Table'. He believed that the service is a medium of communion with Christ actually present with his disciples hosting them with bread and wine as the Giver of grace.

SIMEON AND NONCONFORMITY

Simeon's firm allegiance to the Anglican Church was as much a matter of spiritual duty as of love. In view of the cynical treatment he received from churchmen and university alike he may well have left it for Independency or Presbyterianism. But a godly imperative kept him in its fold. He was wedded to its doctrines set forth in the Thirty-nine Articles and Homilies, and expressed in its Prayer Book. In his opinion the Protestant Reformed Church of England was the truest and finest manifestation of the Christian Faith emanating from scripture and had everything in it to meet his spiritual needs. He was sad to see others departing from it into Dissent and sought, by forming parish Societies, **P. 192** to prevent his own people following them. As to the clergy, Stephen Neill makes the point that the actions of evangelical clergy in the eighteenth century could have led to separation from the Church, but:

The influence of Charles Simeon swung the movement the other way, and all the evangelicals of the first half of the nineteenth century were convinced and devoted churchmen. G. M. Trevelyan's powerful statement that owing to Simeon the drift of evangelical clergy into Dissent was arrested is incontrovertible.

Without him, he went on, 'the Church of England might perhaps have fallen when the tempest of Reform blew high in the thirties'. The respect that evangelicals obtained within the Established Church was, in James Downey's view, 'largely accomplished through the teaching and influence of Charles Simeon who finally won a general respect for evangelical preaching' by his structured presentation of Christian truth and note of authority, and that in a church that rejected Whitefield's and Wesley's effusive style. Credit must also be given to the ordinands who attended his sermon classes and used his homiletic methods in their churches.

But Simeon did not discount nonconformity. His sentiments were warm to those ministers who shared his spiritual views, even to supporting financially Joseph Stittle, a layman, who shepherded some extreme Calvinists who forsook Simeon's ministry. By joining with Free Churchmen in creating Missionary and Home Societies he formed a bridge between Anglicanism and nonconformity, avers Trevelyan. Of Methodism, which hardly touched Cambridge, he had little contact, and met John Wesley but twice, though he visited Fletcher of Madeley and received a warm reception. Wesley's Arminianism and doctrine of perfection were hardly likely to attract the sin-conscious Simeon. Presbyterianism was more to his liking. He made close friends of Scottish ministers, and preached and communicated in their churches. Towards Roman Catholicism he was extremely severe and held the traditional view that its system was not of God. He showed acid disfavour to the Catholic emancipation movement, even refusing to vote for Charles Grant's son, a candidate for Parliament, who favoured it. 'Gladly would I give to the Catholics every privilege that would conduce to their happiness. But to endanger the Protestant ascendancy and stability is a sacrifice which I am not prepared to make,' he said.

In 1829 he set forth his views on Romanism in a Founder's Day sermon in King's College Chapel in which he uttered a stern warning to Church and State arguing that: 'The pursuit of religion is the principal p. 193 thing'. He saw, he said, that the Emancipation measure would expose the nation to the inundation of Papists, and their priests would proselytize in a rapid way for the human heart is more drawn to a religion of rights and duties than to grace alone. Apparently the sermon was widely approved. He questioned whether the Roman system could be reformed. In his view: 'There must be an extermination of it as a Church, and any conversion must be of the individual ... I do not think Popery changed; Papists if they get the power are bound to use every endeavour to convert or destroy Protestants'. Spiritual man though he was, Simeon would never make pragmatism or tradition the ground of true doctrine, or evidence of saving faith. Nor could he accept that the Anglican Church is the *via media* between Romanism and Protestantism. For him there was only one religion, that of the Reformed Faith founded on the Bible. His ecumenicity was not directed towards the creation of a monolithic religious system. In his view Christ's prayer, 'That they may be one', was a desire for a unity of inward life not of outward uniformity. There was thus a need not to preach against purgatory or transubstantiation for these are only Romanist channels of salvation, but to preach 'the great fundamentals of religion', of which Christ's offering upon the cross is God's only means of salvation.

In the modern age, when the Anglican Church is bending over backward to accommodate itself to Roman Catholicism, it is important to note Simeon's incisive attitude on the matter. He never sacrificed principles to consensus opinion.

SIMEON'S TEMPERAMENT AND DISPOSITION

But towards individuals from whom he differed he did not show animosity. Motivated by a love that irradiated his irregular features, his outer life was thoroughly attractive to others who were drawn to him by his warm-hearted nature, eager conversation, and holy walk. 'Love ever beamed on Simeon's face', commented Dr. Dealtry. Wilberforce went further and wrote in his diary, 'Simeon is with us—his heart glowing with love of Christ. How full of love he is, and of desire to promote the spiritual benefit of others. Oh! that I might copy him as he Christ.' J. J. Gurney, the Quaker, noted, 'He is full of love towards all who love his Master, and a faithful sympathising friend to those who have the privilege of sharing in his more intimate affections.' The pure spirituality of an English saint shone forth in him translucent in all he was and attempted. Others noticed his bright smile that expressed joy and tranquillity of a heart at rest in Christ. 'I consider love as wealth,' P. 194 he wrote, 'and as I would resist a man who should come to rob my house, so would I a man who would weaken my regard for any human being'. Believing that faults and failings lie above excellencies he closed his ears to gossip, prejudice or blame. God's grace, he felt, can alone subdue the pleasure of hearing others despised, or in seeking to elevate oneself at their expense. From the time of his conversion, he said, he diligently cultivated the principle of loving all for Jesus' sake. 'If he had the character of a person to study', said William Jowett, 'he examined it to the best of his judgement impartially, without respect of persons, like Jesus'. For Simeon, love for others was a Christian duty provided it was subservient to the love of Christ. The constraint of Jesus' love, more than response to the dominical command to 'disciple' them, channelled his thoughts and energy on behalf of the unconverted and activated him in his work for the Jews, Indians, and the Bible Society.

Nor did his love for others diminish as years passed, for to him to love fervently meant to love intently. He could not bear parting from his intimate friends, and was once found weeping over the memoir of one he had known. His antidote for grief was that the bereaved should pour out love upon those who remain, so softening the anguish of a wounded spirit. His affection for Henry Martyn, the brilliant mathematician and classical scholar who died in Persia is well known. Lesser known is Thomas Thomason (and his wife) who became an East Indian chaplain through Simeon's influence. Bidding them good-bye at Portsmouth, he adored God 'for uniting our hearts in love', but could not bear watching the ship sail down the Solent. Later, he poured out his love upon their son James who, as a child, was placed under Simeon's care during his English schooling. This side of Simeon's character is not always realized. Great and influential as he was he could yet stoop to the mind and personality of a youth whom he said was, 'The most dear and acceptable of all earthly treasures'.

THE NATURE OF SIMEON'S SPIRITUALITY

It remains to consider what elements in Simeon's spirituality made him to be what Constance Padwick judged as, 'One of the most typical English saints that ever lived'. Handley Moule comes near it: 'Perhaps the English Church never had a more loving and devoted son and servant than Simeon'. At the age of seventy-four Simeon thought otherwise in describing his spiritual life as:

That of a sinner before God—it is that I ever expected to be and in fact ever wished it to be—I cannot forget what I am—I do not desire to forget what I p. 195 am—I am even, so to speak, satisfied with being what I am,—that God may be the more glorified.

When once asked, What is the chief mark of regeneration? he answered, 'Self-loathing'; as it was also that of sanctification. 'I want to see more of this humble, contrite, broken

spirit amongst us,' he said. 'The sitting in the dust ([Ezek. 36](#)) is more pleasing to God ... give me a broken-hearted Christian, and I prefer his society to that of all the rest.'

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My Experience With and Without Christ

Sadhu Sundar Singh

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I was born in a family that was commonly considered Sikh, but in which the teaching of Hinduism was considered most essential, and my dear mother was a living example and faithful exponent of its teaching. She used to rise daily before daylight, and, after bathing, used to read the *Bhagavad Gita*, and other Hindu scriptures. I was influenced more than the rest of the family by her pure life and teaching. She early impressed on me the rule that my first duty on rising in the morning was that I should pray to God for spiritual food and blessing, and that only after so doing should I breakfast. At times I insisted that I must have food first, but my God-fearing mother, sometimes with love and sometimes with punishment, fixed this habit firmly in my mind, that I should first seek God, and after that other things. Although at that time I was too young to appreciate the value of these things, yet later on I realized their value, and now, whenever I think of it, I thank God for that training, and I can never be sufficiently thankful to God for giving me such a mother, who in my earliest years instilled in me the love and fear of God. Her bosom was for me my best theological school, and she prepared me, as much as she was able, to work for the Lord as a Sadhu.

A PUNDIT AND A SADHU

My mother for some years instructed me from the holy books of the Hindu scriptures, and then handed me over to a Hindu pundit, and to an old Sikh Sadhu. They used to come to our house for two or three hours daily to teach me. The pundit taught me single lessons out of the Hindu *Shastras*, and, when he died, another pundit, Nashi Nath, taught me the Sanskrit scriptures. The venerable Sadhu taught me the Granth, or Sikh scriptures. I recognized that I got some degree of consolation from this teaching, but I was still hungering for real peace. They taught me with great sympathy, and freely gave me the benefit of their experiences; but they had not themselves had that real blessing for which my soul was craving, so how could they help me to get it? **P. 197**

MY FATHER

I often used to read the Hindu scriptures till midnight that I might in some way quench the thirst of my soul for peace. My father often objected, saying: 'It is bad for your health to read so late.' Though there was much in my home to make me happy, I was not attracted by it. My father often remonstrated with me, saying: 'Boys of your age think of nothing but games and play, but how has this mania possessed you at so early an age? There is plenty of time to think of these things later in life. I suppose you must have got this madness from your mother and the Sadhu.'

THE PUNDIT AND I

I frequently asked the pundit to explain my spiritual difficulties for me. He said: 'Your difficulties seem to be of a new and strange kind. I can only say that when you grow up and get more experience and knowledge about spiritual life, these difficulties will disappear of themselves. Now don't worry about these things at present, but do what your father advises you.' I said to him; 'Suppose I do not live till I grow up, then what will happen? Besides, this getting one's hunger or thirst satisfied does not depend on age or on whether one is big or little. If a hungry boy asks for bread would you say, "Go and play, and when you are big and can understand the real meaning of hunger, then you will get

bread"? Will he be happy in playing when he is hungry, or can he live till he is grown up if he gets no food? He should get food now. I feel very hungry for spiritual bread. If you have not got it, then please tell me where and how I can get it. If you do not know where I can get it then say so.' The pundit said: 'You cannot understand these deep spiritual things now. You cannot get to the grade of spirituality all at once. To get to it a long time is essential. Why are you in such a hurry to get to it? If this hunger is not satisfied in this life it will be satisfied in your next re-births, provided that you keep on trying for it.' So saying, he evaded me, and my problem was not solved.

THE SADHU AND I

I spoke to the Sadhu several times about my difficulties, but he also gave me a somewhat similar answer: 'Do not worry about it. When you get knowledge (*jnana*), all these difficulties will disappear.' I replied: 'No doubt it is true that when I obtain this perfect ultimate knowledge my difficulties will disappear, but even at this stage the little knowledge that I have should remove some of my difficulties, while I **P. 198** should be able to hope for further enlightenment in the future. But I do not see how this increase of knowledge will be able to do much, for it looks as if further knowledge will result in my needs and difficulties being still more clearly seen by me, and how will these new needs be met? Here one requires not only knowledge but bread for the hungry, for when this little knowledge has shown my needs to me, then more knowledge will show more needs, so the question is: How am I to meet these needs?'

The Sadhu replied: 'Not with imperfect, finite knowledge but with perfect and final knowledge will your needs be met; for when you get perfect knowledge you will realise that this need, or want, is only an illusion, and that you yourself are Brahma (God) or a part of him, and, when you realise this then what more will you need?' I persisted, 'Excuse me, but I cannot believe this, for if I am a part of Brahma, or am myself Brahma, then I should be incapable of having any *Maya* (Illusion). But if *Maya* is possible in Brahma, then Brahma is no longer Brahma, for he has been subordinated to *Maya*. Hence *Maya* is stronger than Brahma himself, and *Maya* will then not be *Maya* (Illusion) but will be a reality that has overcome Brahma, and we shall have to think of Brahma himself as *Maya*, and this is blasphemy.

'In this way, instead of helping me you are throwing me into a whirlpool. I shall be most thankful to you, if from your experience and knowledge you can help me to know him so that I may satisfy my spiritual hunger and thirst in him. But please remember that I do not want to be absorbed in him, but I do want to obtain salvation in him.' Then he said: 'Child, it is useless to waste time on these things now. The time will come when you yourself will understand these things.'

Again I was disappointed, I could not find anywhere that spiritual food for which I hungered, and in this state of unrest I remained till I found the Living Christ.

LYING AND STEALING

From my earliest years my mother impressed on me that I should abstain from every kind of sin, and should be sympathetic and helpful to all in trouble. One day, when my father had given me some pocket money I ran off to the bazaar to spend it. On the way I saw a very old woman famished with cold and hunger. When she asked help from me, I felt such pity that I gave her all my money. I came back home and told my father that he should give the poor woman a blanket or she would die of cold. He put me off by saying that he had often **P. 199** helped her before and that it was the turn of the neighbours to do their part.

When I saw that he was not willing to help her, by stealth I extracted five rupees from his pocket intending to give it to her to buy a blanket with. The thought that I should be able to help her gave me great satisfaction, but the thought that I was a thief pricked my conscience. My distress was further increased in the evening when my father, on discovering that the rupees were missing, asked me if I had taken them and I denied it. Though I had escaped from punishment, my conscience so tormented me the whole night that I could not sleep. Early in the morning I went to my father, and confessed my theft and my lies, and gave back the money. In spite of the fear that he would punish me the burden was at once removed from my heart. But instead of punishing me, he took me in his arms, and with tears in his eyes said: 'My son, I have always trusted you, and now I have good proof that I was not wrong.' He not only forgave me, but spent the five rupees on a blanket for the old woman, and gave me another rupee for myself to buy sweets with. After that he never refused when I asked for anything, and on my part, I decided that I would never do anything that should be against my conscience, or against my parents' will.

DEATH OF MY BROTHER AND MOTHER

Some time after this my mother died, and a few months later my elder brother also died. This brother's nature and turn of mind were very like my own. The loss of these two dear ones was a great shock to me; especially did the thought that I should never see them again cast me into despondency and despair, because I could never know into what form they had been re-born, nor could I ever even guess what I was likely to be in my next re-births. In the Hindu religion the only consolation for a broken heart like mine was that I should submit to my Fate, and bow down to the inexorable law of *Karma*.

MISSION AND GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Now another change came into my life. I was sent, for my secular education, to a small primary school that had been opened by the American Presbyterian Mission in our village at Rampur. At that time I had so many prejudices about Christianity that I refused to read the Bible at the daily Bible lessons. My teachers insisted that I should attend; but I was so opposed to this that the next year I left that school, and went to a Government school at Sanewal three miles away, and **P. 200** there I studied for some months. To some extent I felt that the teaching of the gospel on the love of God attracted me, but I still thought it was false and opposed it. So firmly was I set in my opinions, and so great was my unrest, that one day, in the presence of my father and others, I tore up a Gospel and burned it.

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE LIVING CHRIST

Though, according to my ideas at that time, I thought I had done a good deed in burning the Gospel, yet my unrest of heart increased, and for two days after that I was very miserable. On the third day, when I felt I could bear it no longer, I got up at three in the morning, and after bathing, I prayed that if there was a God at all he would reveal himself to me, and show me the way of salvation, and end this unrest of my soul. I firmly made up my mind that, if this prayer was not answered, I would before daylight go down to the railway, and place my head on the line before the incoming train. I remained till about half-past four praying and waiting and expecting to see Krishna, or Buddha, or some other *Avatar* of the Hindu religion: they appeared not, but a light was shining in the room. I opened the door to see where it came from, but all was dark outside. I returned inside,

and the light increased in intensity and took the form of a globe of light above the ground, and in this light there appeared, not the form I expected, but the Living Christ whom I had counted as dead. To all eternity I shall never forget his glorious and loving face, nor the few words which he spoke: 'Why do you persecute me? See, I have died on the Cross for you and for the whole world.' These words were burned into my heart as by lightning, and I fell on the ground before him. My heart was filled with inexpressible joy and peace, and my whole life was entirely changed. Then the old Sundar Singh died and a new Sundar Singh, to serve the Living Christ, was born.

THE BEGINNING OF PERSECUTION

After a little while I went to my father, who was still sleeping, and told him of the appearance, and that I was now a Christian. He said: 'What are you talking about? It is only three days since you burned their book. Go away and sleep, you silly boy'; and he himself turned over again. Later on I told the whole family what I had seen, and that I was now a Christian. Some said I was mad, some that I had dreamed; but, when they saw that I was not to be turned, they began to persecute me. But the persecution was nothing compared with that miserable P. 201 unrest I had had when I was without Christ; and it was not difficult for me to endure the troubles and persecution which now began.

The thought of being a Sadhu had long been in my mind. and I now decided that as a Sadhu I would serve the Lord Christ. There were two or three other boys at that time who also wanted to become Christians. Two, because of the punishment given them by their parents, went back, and another went to Khanna, and was baptized there by the Rev. E. P. Newton, but shortly afterwards his father went to him with a story that his mother was dying, and enticed him back. Very soon after he died, apparently of poison.

CHRISTIANS A STUMBLING BLOCK

When it became difficult for me to remain at Ramput, Mr. Newton advised me to go into the Christian Boys Boarding School at Ludhiana. There the missionaries, Drs. Wherry and Fife, received me very kindly, and protected me in every way. But I was shocked when I saw the un-Christian life of some of the Christian boys and of some of the local Christians, for I had the idea that those who followed the Living Christ must be like angels; in this I was sadly mistaken. It is quite possible that had I not had that appearance of the Living Christ, and received new life from Him, I should have stumbled and gone astray and become an enemy of Christianity. Even as it was, I decided to leave the school and these Christians and live apart, and as a Sadhu, follow Christ wherever He should lead me in His work. During the summer holidays I went to Subathu and Simla and, instead of returning to school, I was baptized, and began to go about as a Sadhu and preach the gospel.

Non-Christian seekers after truth willingly suffer unbelievable hardships in order to find it, and had all who claim to be Christians been anything like as true or whole-hearted in their effort to spread the kingdom of the Living Christ, the whole world would long ago have become Christian. But we have to confess that in this the Christian Church has signally failed.

MEDICINE IN THE EYE

Now, through living with Christ and having had experience of him, I have learned this secret, that before ever I knew him or believed on him as my Saviour, He, unknown to me,

was working in my soul like medicine working in the eye. For the eye cannot see the medicine that is in it which is clearing the sight, though it feels its presence. **P. 202**

MOTHER AND CHILD

My restless soul searched for him; but, though he was near, he was hidden from my view and was trying to bring me to himself. I was in the world's garden like a child whose mother had hidden herself behind a bush. The child began to cry, and as soon as the gardener heard him he came and to soothe him offered him one kind of fruit after another. But he threw them all down and kept on crying: 'I don't want them. I want my mother.' At last his mother came out from behind the bush, and taking him in her arms, kissed him and wiped his tears. Safe in her arms he found what he wanted. In this way, our Universal Mother at times hides herself in the garden of this Universe. Those who, like this child, can be satisfied with nothing but their mother's love, will find that she also watches them and lifts them to her bosom, and wiping away their tears, restores to them real happiness for ever ([Isaiah 49:15](#); [Rev. 21:3-4](#)).

FAITH AND LOVE

Without Christ I was without hope and full of fear about the future life. Now, by his presence, he has turned fear into love, and hopelessness into realization; and fear is transitory, but love is eternal. Faith and love are the tendrils of the soul, which, in the light and heat of God's sun, grow towards heaven, and cling round the Lord of Love; but without him, hopeless and in the dark, they wither away and die.

DEATH AND LIFE

In fellowship with Him, who is the Resurrection and the Life, we are freed from fear of death, and by sharing in that victory over death, enter into eternal life. He is, at the same time, present in both worlds. He was in the physical world and was at the same time in the spiritual world; because, when he stood at the tomb of Lazarus and with his Creator's voice said: 'Lazarus, come forth,' he called the spirit of his friend not from his body, nor from his grave but from the spiritual world. Thence, as soon as it heard his command, it returned to the grave and to his body.

A VILLAGE EXPERIENCE

It is a characteristic of this new life that it constrains one to bring others to Christ, not by compulsion but from the desire to let others share in the joy of this wonderful experience. However sore one's trials may be, they are forgotten in the joy of that service. **P. 203**

Once I went to preach at a village two miles from my old home in Ramput. I spoke for a long time, and it was dark before I finished, and then the people all left me and went to their houses. Tired and hungry I sought rest under a tree. I had had no food all day, and it was against my principles to beg. Lying there, weak and hungry, Satan tempted me with the thought that, when I was at my home I always had every comfort, but now that I had left all for Christ's sake I was poor and hungry. Then, in spite of it all, my heart was filled with a wonderful peace and joy, that not only overcame the temptation, but compelled me to break out into song, and till midnight I praised the Lord; and after this, these words broke from my lips: 'When I had ease and comfort at home, I knew nothing of this

wonderful peace. But now when all is gone I have found in Christ this peace, which the world can neither give nor take away.'

Some of the people had been aroused by my singing, and two of them came to me. They were greatly impressed when I told them a little of my experience, but when they heard that I had not eaten since morning they were very perturbed that I had not told them. They at once prepared some food and gave it to me, and I thanked God and them; and, having eaten it, I lay down and slept.

EXPERIENCE IN RAMPUR

The next day I preached in a few villages nearby and then went to Rampur. There also the people listened well. In the evening I went to my home. At first my father refused to see me, or to let me in, because by becoming a Christian I had dishonoured the family. But after a little while he came out and said: 'Very well, you can stay here to-night; but you must get out early in the morning; don't show me your face again.' I remained silent, and that night he made me sit at a distance that I might not pollute them or their vessels and then he brought me food, and gave me water to drink by pouring it into my hands from a vessel held high above, as one does who gives drink to an outcaste. When I saw this treatment, I could not restrain the tears from flowing from my eyes that my father, who used to love me so much, now hated me as if I was an untouchable. In spite of all this, my heart was filled with inexpressible peace. I thanked him for this treatment also, and said: 'It does not matter if you have forsaken me, because I have taken Christ for the love of him who gave his life for me, and his love is unchangeable, and is far greater than yours. Before I became a Christian I dishonoured Christ, but he did not forsake me; now I do not complain. I thank you for your past love to me, and also for this **P. 204** present treatment,' and respectfully I said good-bye, and went away. In the fields I prayed and thanked God, and then slept under a tree; and in the morning continued my way.

THE LORD'S TRUE PROMISE

When I first began preaching I went to my own village and to the villages in its neighbourhood, but after that I went on extended tours all over India. Little by little the Lord sent me in the way of his service to different countries of the world, and after many years, my unceasing prayer was answered and my father also turned to the Lord. Though I have had to go through various kinds of suffering it has all been for me a means of great blessing, and with thankful heart I can truly say from my experience that every word is literally true in the promises of the Lord who said: 'There is no man that hath left house, brethren, or sisters, or mother, or father, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake and the Gospel's but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time; houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and, in the world to come, eternal life' ([Mark 10:29-30](#)). I have found not only a hundredfold, but a hundred times a hundredfold, and if there are any to whom this promise is not fulfilled, it does not mean that the Lord's promise is not true; it means rather that there is something wrong in their lives, or that God has 'provided some better thing' concerning them ([Heb. 11:39-4](#)).

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) a convert to Christ in the Punjab, India. p. 205

Understanding the New Age

Philip C. Almond

Printed with permission from St. Mark's Review, (Spring 1990).

How can we understand the vast variety of disparate phenomena that shelter under the umbrella of the term 'the New Age'? Should we view it sociologically as a rejection of the values of advanced capitalism or effete socialism for a new set of personalistic beliefs and attitudes? Perhaps we should view it psychologically as a refuge for those alienated from themselves and from others. Or, should we rejoice in it as a new Reformation, rekindling the fires of spirituality for so long dampened by the technological rationalism of the modern industrial West? However we interpret it, there can be little doubt that the New Age is playing a significant role in the construction of late twentieth century Western consciousness.

But is it all that new? I want to suggest that the New Age may fruitfully be seen as the resurgence of what may be called the Western esoteric tradition—of neo-Platonism, particularly of its theurgic elements, of gnosticism, of Hermeticism, of medieval magic and alchemy. In short, it is a resurgence of the 'other' in the history of Western thought, often in conflict with orthodox Christianity, sometimes in creative tension with it, occasionally suppressed by it.

SIGNS OF THE APOCALYPSE

The notion of a New Age is an apocalyptic one. From the beginning of the Christian era, the habit of predicting the Second Coming and/or the Millennium had entered the fabric of Western culture. But it was with Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth century Cistercian monk, that the idea of distinctive 'ages' in history that lead, in linear fashion, to a cosmic conclusion took shape. Thus did people for the first time begin to think of themselves as participants in an Age. And thus does the term 'the New Age' symbolize a radical change in beliefs, values, consciousness—an end of one time, and the beginning of a better one.

For some New Agers, being in the New Age is a sign that the end of the world is near. Traditional millenarian expectations are in play. Thus, for example, pop eschatologist Hal Lindsey's *Countdown to Armageddon* was in 1981 the best-selling religious work of the year in the United States. This was traditional apocalyptic guesswork with its linking of contemporary events to Daniel and Revelation. As ill-suited to clear predictions as the books of Daniel and Revelation, the New Age fascination with the obscure quatrains of the sixteenth century 'Prophet' Nostradamus is likewise a powerful sign of its apocalyptic trends.

But it would be wrong to suggest that all New Agers are apocalypticists, either in the Christian or the esoteric sense. For there is a strongly secularist edge to much New Age thought. There is often little suggestion of a cataclysmic end to the world through divine intervention. Indeed, in so far as 'God' remains part of the rhetoric of the New Age, it is of a being essentially non-interventionist, conceived both impersonally and personally, and where the latter as both male and female, both Father and Magna Mater.

Be that as it may, remnants of apocalypticism remain in the ideal of the Utopia that would arise, of the Paradise that would return, were the beliefs and practices of the New Age to become dominant. Here, of course is the link between the New Age vision of Paradise regained on earth, a classic image of Western Utopian and Millenarian thought,

and New Age concerns for the Environment. Underlying environmental concerns for both animate and inanimate nature is the vision of a world in which the earth, animals, and humankind coexist in fruitful and mutually beneficent harmony. Nature restored is Civilisation rejected or at least radically reformed.

Such environmental concerns are reinforced also by an inchoate pantheism—a sense that all is divine and the divine is in all. Such pantheism echoes both Hindu and Zen Buddhist concerns, but is most influenced by Chinese Taoism with its emphasis on cosmic harmony, on the creative interplay of opposites necessary to cosmic and individual wellbeing. In short, from traditional Western utopianism, and from Eastern attitudes to nature, the New Age has produced a powerful symbology uniquely suited (certainly far more than traditional Christian symbolism) to Western environmental concerns.

CHANNELLING

It is in the idea of channelling that there resides the experiential core of the New Age. Channelling is, quite simply, the process by which a person (the channel) transmits messages from a source (usually discarnate) external to his or her consciousness. Thus, against the materialism of late twentieth century culture, the New Age boldly declares its belief in the realm of spirit.

The immediate antecedents of channelling can be found in the mid-nineteenth century movement known as Spiritualism. From the Fox family of Hydesville, New York, who purportedly communicated with p. 207 spirits that responded to questions with ghostly rapping and knocking noises, Spiritualism rapidly spread through the United States, England, and Europe, progressively developing more sophisticated techniques for communicating with the other world—with the spirits of dead friends, relatives and ‘spirit-guides’.

Spiritualism, with its cosmology of a universe populated with spirits living and dead was itself a resurgence of a medieval and early modern European world view, one in which the realm of spirit—angelic and demonic—continually interacted with the world of the living. And more broadly, spiritualism and channelling may be seen as one embodiment (so to say) of a universal religious phenomenon—that of communication with the spirit world—typified in shamanic religious traditions.

The New Age too has its shamans, most notably Carlos Castaneda. In a series of works, Castaneda has detailed his encounters with the Yaqui Indian sorcerer ‘Don Juan’ thus becoming heir to a magical tradition that stretches back 500 years to pre-conquest Mexico. Whether fact or fiction, in the writings of Castaneda, the genre of magical autobiography was revived. Magical transformations, esoteric wisdom, mystical initiations, all create for the reader powerful images of an alternative reality imbedded in nature lost to those endowed only with modern Western urban culture, and they conjure a world in which spiritual laws and ancient wisdom provide access to ultimate truth.

Here too is expressed the New Age interest in magic and the occult. The vogue of occultism was created by a French seminarian during the first half of the nineteenth century. It is from the works of Eliphas Levi that the modern interest in the occult has developed. His own writings were an eclectic combination of the Cabbalism of Isaac Luria, of Christian Rosenroth, of Jacob Boehme, and Emmanuel Swedenborg, all of whom were themselves influenced by the resurgence of the occult during the Renaissance, of magic, astrology, theurgy, alchemy, etc.

Of all these resurgent arcane disciplines, the most popular in the New Age is astrology. At one level, astrology enables the mapping of the meaning of the cosmos as a whole—the New Age is the age of Aquarius. But, astrology confers meaning too on individual lives.

True, one's life is determined by the movements of the heavens. But what grandeur! Human life, my life—has a purpose, a cosmic meaning, a pre-established pattern. No longer am I an anonymous individual fated to live out life in a godless, absurd, and meaningless universe.

And of life after life? As nineteenth century spiritualism was p. 208 motivated by a quest for the certainty of post-mortem existence, so also is the New Age in its focus on out-of-the-body and near-death experiences. For these experiences suggest the existence of consciousness in a non-material form, and its continuation after death. Moreover, near-death experiences suggest not only post-mortem consciousness but happiness and contentment beyond the grave. The New Age vision of the after-life is of universal happiness.

An alternative New Age scenario of the after-life is provided by reincarnationism. The New Age provides technologies of past-life regression by which our past lives can be discovered, thus giving an understanding of who we are now by who we have been in previous lives. It does so in a context informed by both the reincarnation ideas of the Eastern religions, and by those of the Western tradition, most notably the seventeenth century Cabbalism of Isaac Luria mediated through the Theosophical tradition. But in contrast to the Indian traditions which view the infinite process of birth, death, and rebirth as that from which one must escape, the New Age views rebirth much more positively. Reincarnation not only reveals the past, it guarantees future lives. It functions then as an alternative immortality.

The provision of technologies is central to the New Age—technologies of meditation, of relaxation, of self-centring, of healing, of massage, of past life regression, of rebirthing, and so on. Generally speaking, the aim of all these is to facilitate one's inner growth, to maximize one's potential, to discover who one really is by piercing beneath the every day self, to harness the resources at the depths of the self, and to 'exorcize' the demons within which curtail one's ability to realise fully one's potential. In short, any ideology and any technology which helps personal development may be utilised.

ECLECTICISM

Indeed, it is the syncretism, or rather the eclecticism, of the New Age that is its most significant aspect. 'I believe in everything' is, to put it simply, the credo of the New Age. It is easy to dismiss this as merely the result of woolly-mindedness or wishful thinking. In part, it is the result of a New Age attitude to truth which defines it in predominantly personalistic terms; to paraphrase Kierkegaard, the truth that edifies is the truth for thee. But also, beneath the propensity to embrace everything—from psychic phenomena to palmistry, from the Tarot to trance, from reincarnation to rebirthing—there is an underlying epistemology that enables us to see the movement as a whole.

Historically, we can see the New Age as the child of the p.209 Theosophical movement, itself a product of the fascination with mysticism, magic, and the occult during the latter part of the last century. In England it was the age of Esoteric Buddhism, of the Rosicrucian revival, of Cabbalists, Hermeticists, of magic and witchcraft. Palmists and astrologists abounded. Books on magic and the occult sold briskly. Books on the lost years of Jesus in India—'The Life of St. Issa', 'The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ'—provoked controversy.

In this milieu the Theosophical Society found a comfortable home. Founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and her partner Henry Olcott, it was both a product of late Victorian culture, and the conduit of traditional occult Western thought. It is hardly surprising that, with the discovery and, late in the nineteenth century, the publication of the Scriptures of

the Eastern religions, Madame Blavatsky should have stressed the Eastern origins of her teachings. But in the late nineteenth century, the term 'theosophy' conjured up images, not only of Madame Blavatsky's Mahatmas in the snowy reaches of the Himalayas, but also of Cabbalism, neo-Platonism, the Hermetic writings, and the secret wisdom of the Egyptians. And allied to this was the Gnostic notion of specially-initiated adepts with access to secret documents that encoded the key to the mysteries of existence. The Theosophical movement synthesised the 'other' of Western thought. It constructed a unity of alternatives. It did so by maintaining that the same mystical truth lay beneath all the esoteric books, doctrines, beliefs and practices of the occult traditions, and of the sacred books of the East, of the Talmud, the Quran and the Bible. In this notion of a hidden wisdom known only to a few adepts we have the unifying idea which enables the different, the disparate, the contradictory to be held together. Within the context of this synthesis, Theosophy strove to develop what it perceived as human faculties to their highest capacities. Exactly the same may be said of the New Age.

Undoubtedly, the Theosophical Society was instrumental in introducing many Eastern religious concepts to the popular Western consciousness, all of which still resonate in New Age texts: exoteric concepts such as karma and reincarnation, but also more recondite teachings such as those of the chakra system, the bodily aura, the astral body. It spawned other esoteric groups such as the Order of the Golden Dawn to which the New Age owes the forging of the links between Tarot cards, astrology, and the Cabbalah.

The New Age then does draw on ancient traditions—albeit inchoately and generally unconsciously—from both West and East. In that sense it is not new. But its combination of West and East, of the [p. 210](#) esoteric and the occult, of the magical and the mystical, is a very modern phenomenon. It stands above all as a reaction to the technological rationalism and materialism of late twentieth century culture. It is a declaration of spirit over matter, of alternative thought against conventional ideology, of hidden wisdom against accepted truth. Whether it is true or false is beside the point.

What is not beside the point is that it is a religious movement. The New Age movement sacralizes the profane, it re-establishes the connection between the mundane and the transcendent. Religions serve above all to create meaning—through sacred texts, doctrines, rituals, values, and social organizations. All these, the New Age has in abundance. Religions serve to structure the world and one's place in it, to give us a sense of the past, a guide to the present, and a hope for the future, to provide means significantly to transform our lives. All these the New Age does. To understand the New Age is to understand it as an alternative religion, and one which attempts to legitimize aspects of Western religious thought which have been always 'other'.

FURTHER READING

As yet, there is no serious scholarly analysis of the New Age. However, Richard Cavendish's *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, (London, 1974) remains a goldmine of information on the background to the New Age. Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, (New York, 1980) outlines many of its implicit assumptions—the universe as an organism, the oneness of all people. Shirley Maclaine's *Out on a Limb* gives useful insights into the New Age California-style (a la Monterey, my dear Watson). On Spiritualism and psychic theorising in the nineteenth century, Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World*, (Cambridge, 1985) is essential reading. On Shamanism as a religious phenomenon, Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*, (Chicago, 1964) remains the definitive work. On the occult traditions in the Renaissance, Frances Yates' *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* is seminal although a difficult read. On nineteenth and twentieth

century occultism, James Webb's *The Occult Underground* (Illinois, 1974), and *The Occult Establishment* (Illinois, 1976) are highly informative and fascinating. A useful introduction to astrology is provided by Christopher Macintosh, *The Astrologers and their Creed*, (London, 1969). Bruce Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, (Berkeley, 1980) is a standard history of the theosophical movement. For the New Age novel of the 1980s, one cannot go past Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*.

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Spirituality and an Experiential Approach to Religious Education

Penny Thompson

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Spirituality has become an important theme of the National Curriculum. It is intended that attention should be paid to the spiritual dimension of every subject area. The spiritual aspect should be seen to pervade the whole of human experience.

This would seem a welcome development to Christians who have seen their faith marginalized and given less and less room to influence either education or public life in general. However, we need to ask what is meant by 'spirituality'. We may be dealing with a secularized spirituality. On visits to prospective schools for our children we may find headteachers insisting on the importance of spirituality. In one case in the writer's recent experience, the Head was clearly an agnostic with little time for God. The word 'God' did not appear in the school's prospectus and when, in a letter, he needed to mention God the word appeared in inverted commas. Yet he insisted that he considered spirituality to be very important. For him, at least, it would seem that spirituality had little to do with belief in a personal God.

This year's Reith lecturer, the Chief-Rabbi elect of the U.K., spoke of the inability of the society in which we live, dominated as it is by the motive of consumerism, to fulfil the deeper needs of the people. In the wake of the demise of the two great visions of the twentieth century, Marxism and Fascism, there is an emptiness which consumerism cannot satisfy. Perhaps the popular emphasis on spirituality is a reaction to this vacuum. For the Chief Rabbi it is the task of the religions to step in and show the way forward. For those who have rejected traditional religion, however, and I number the agnostic Headmaster among their number, a simple return to religious faith is unlikely to be the answer. For them spirituality may mean something quite different.

Religious words may be used in a way that empties them of theological meaning while retaining a religious connotation. This appears to add depth yet has no base in a real belief about God. In this way, 'Christmas' may come to mean human giving and sharing rather than Incarnation and God's giving to humankind. In a recent lesson, for example, I used a page of the 'Radio Times' in which there was an abundance of religious words such as

'requiem', 'spirit', 'afterlife', p. 212 'ritual' but there was little serious consideration of religion involved in the programmes concerned. Modern man has yet to find a satisfactory substitute for the richness of experience and meaning given him by his religious ancestry. It is not so easy, in the striking words used by the Chief Rabbi, to 'edit God out of the language'.

AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO R.E.

It is natural that the professionals in R.E. should be looked to for their contribution to the analysis of the meaning of 'spirituality'. The approach I am about to examine has a great deal to say on this issue and it is therefore not surprising that it is becoming so influential at the present time.

This approach is set forth in a recently published book, *New Methods in R.E.: An Experiential Approach*,¹ the fruit of the work of the Religious Experience and Education Project. This project, based at the School of Education at Nottingham University, has involved advisors and primary and secondary teachers in most areas of the country. It is in turn the outcome of work at the Alister Hardy Research Centre in Oxford. Among the book's contributors are John Hammond of St Martin's College, Lancaster and David Hay, the Director of the Project.

Many training courses in this approach have been held up and down the country (and the writer has recently attended both a one day and a residential weekend course). It is claimed that the approach has radically changed the methods and attitudes of numerous teachers. It has been adopted by teachers of diverse religious commitments and has been welcomed by many Christians.

To what is the undoubted success of this approach due? Its aims are not apparently different from those of the most modern R.E. syllabi so perhaps its success is due entirely to its new methods, as the title of the book would suggest. If so, a Christian teacher who is in sympathy with the aims of modern R.E. may adopt it with confidence. If, however, we find in this approach the outworkings of a philosophy or vision with a dynamism of its own, a cool appraisal of the nature of this vision will be called for. p. 213

THE TWO AIMS OF R.E.

To evaluate this approach, it is necessary to look first at the aims it sets out to achieve. These are described as follows:—

These (the two aims of R.E.) are: helping pupils to understand the perspective of the religious person without suggesting or implying that they should personally adopt a particular perspective, and helping pupils to develop their own individual responses to the spiritual dimension.²

These aims will be found in one way or another in most recent R.E. syllabi with the addition, in some cases, of a rider to the effect that there should be due emphasis given to Christianity as the dominant religion of our culture. A further aim is sometimes stated: that of developing an attitude of tolerance and respect towards all those who hold religious beliefs that are at variance with one's own. In fact, this aim is central to this approach, dominated as it is by the phenomenological method that underpins it. The

¹ John Hammond, *et al*, *New Methods in R.E.: An Experiential Approach* (Oliver and Boyd, 1990).

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

phenomenological method, despite mounting criticism in recent years, still is uppermost in most people's conceptions of modern R.E. It is assumed to be a necessary foundation to R.E. and it is taken for granted in the approach of the book in question. It has the status of a dogma, a *sine qua non* of modern R.E. theory.

The link with phenomenology implied in the first aim mentioned above is made more explicit in the following passage from the book:—

Phenomenology is primarily concerned with understanding—understanding the nature and source of religion(s), and understanding oneself in relation to religion. In aiming to develop understanding, empathy and respect for different religious traditions, phenomenology transcends questions of indoctrination and the undermining of the faith which may be raised when a critical or analytical approach is stressed.³

Empathy has been around in R.E. since long before History got hold of it! In R.E., it entails the 'bracketing out' of personal convictions and critical notions and an entering into the experience of the religious believer. Only so will an outsider be able to understand and thereby respect the convictions of another. A second important aspect is to teach that there are many different ways of understanding the world. This is brought out in the following passage:—

One of our main objectives is to help pupils become aware that their own p. 214 way of seeing the world is only one among many perspectives: thus assisting the development of the skills of empathy.⁴

There are some subtle undercurrents here. On the one hand, it must be part of growing up to realize that there are many views about the meaning of life and to many children growing up with a materialist view of reality it may be very difficult to accept that theirs is not the only possible view. To do so is in fact to undermine faith. This is not such a problem for the phenomenologist who is at heart a relativist but it may, and often does, raise problems for the believer in some form of absolute truth, whether atheist or theist. The obvious thing to do, having raised the fact of the plurality of truth-claims, is to discuss their relative merits yet this is the very thing that is forbidden lest it harm the empathic enterprise.

Phenomenology offers no way of assessing a religion. It can suggest no way of responding to it either. It offers a method for entering into the experience of faith without any rationale for so doing. The suspension of the critical faculty is a serious problem. The reason for it is the impossibility of agreeing on a rational standpoint from which to assess a religion. This is a very real difficulty but the alternative also has its problems. If religion is beyond criticism then it is also beyond approval. There is neither reason to reject nor to recommend it. It becomes, for all that is said to the contrary, a museum piece that you can admire or not as takes your fancy. It invites an existentialist 'leap of faith'. It has been relegated to the area of the meaningless, beyond falsification in the realm of the 'upper storey'. This approach may unwittingly breed indifference followed by hostility to religion. This possibility is brought out in the following from a Farmington Trust Occasional Paper written by John McIntyre:—

It was Don Cupitt who first drew my attention to the intellectual sequence that may well follow this type of purely descriptive religious education. Modifying a little what he said, you begin with the affirmation of *strict neutrality* in relation to the religions presented, on

³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the grounds that adherence to any one of them would be unfair to the rest. In that context, *subjectivism* comes into its own, as emphasising the fact that choice among the different religions is a matter of purely subjective preference. There is no ground objectively discernible or objectively denoted by the presenter, why one should be preferred to any other. At that point *indifferentism* appears for it is a matter of pure indifference which you choose; one is just as good or as bad, as true or as false as any other. It is possible at this stage to adopt *humanism*, and to interpret the whole religious phenomenon as man's attempt to come to terms with himself and his environment, in a manner that gives him greatest solace. The final stages of the process would be *agnosticism* and *atheism*.⁵

That hostility to religion exists among our pupils is not in doubt. Many surveys have shown this over the last few years. It is perhaps still too early, however, for the conclusion to be drawn that phenomenology has something to do with this. *New Methods* takes the view that it is not phenomenology that is at fault but rather that it has not been taught properly. The hostility to religion exists and has prevented pupils from entering into the experience of empathizing with the religious believer. What is needed is a way of persuading pupils to enter into the experience. In the approach in question an opting out of real phenomenology seems to take place at this point. It is often stated that the approach does not offer 'religious experience'. Rather, it offers a 'way in' or an 'open door'. It does this by breaking down the barriers of 'us' and 'them' so that pupils are able to begin to identify with those who follow a religion. This is achieved by showing pupils through exercises of an experiential nature that they have an inner world which gives meaning to their lives. Then, again through the experiential method, i.e., actually experiencing the truth that is being conveyed, they are led to see that others have their own inner world or life-history which may be very different from their own but equally important to them. This may be done by showing the pupils ambiguous puzzle-pictures, e.g., that of the duck/rabbit which may be interpreted in different ways. The hope is that by showing that they too have a religious or spiritual side, pupils will be disposed to look more favourably on those whose experience is more explicitly 'religious'.

This aim cannot be faulted and the approach appears to be successful. A third year pupil from a Roman Catholic comprehensive school in Nottingham is quoted as saying:—

My ideas of religious experience have changed because before I thought religious experience was when God appeared to the chosen few but now I see that it is an everyday occurrence. It's not for the chosen few but for everyone.⁶

It is interesting to note that this girl identifies her experience as 'religious'. It may be natural for pupils to see their experience this way p.216 yet to the authors of *New Methods* this experience should not be seen as 'religious'.

In addition to its own internal difficulties, the phenomenological approach has serious implications for the attainment of the second aim mentioned earlier. It can offer no guidance in the development of a response to the spiritual dimension. It positively forbids the rational analysis of a particular viewpoint or, indeed, any method which might lead to the 'adoption of a particular perspective'. All it can do is to increase awareness and understanding. As the authors write:—

⁵ John McIntyre, 'Occasional Paper No. 3' (Oxford: The Farmington Institute for Christian Studies, 1978), quoted in Edward Hulmes, *Commitment and Neutrality* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), p. 48.

⁶ *New Methods in R.E.*, p. 29.

They (the exercises) do not provide answers. Nor do they intend to induce change. They provide opportunities to become more aware and absorb that experience.⁷

The authors acknowledge that there is a tension between the two accepted aims of R.E. and, in the context of their statement of these aims, they write:—

While this approach offers a vehicle in which pupils can approach the spiritual world it does not alter the underlying tension between two of the aims of religious education.⁸

SPIRITUALITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE AIMS OF R.E.

How then does the book and the approach in general attempt to resolve this tension and how successful is it? It is important to note that the word 'spiritual' is used rather than 'religious' in the second aim stated. Basic to the whole approach is the conviction that all religious and, indeed, non-religious perspectives have one thing in common: their spirituality. Something of this is seen in the following extracts from the book:—

To concentrate on externals such as discussion of doctrine, moral stances, pilgrimages, rituals, etc. is to ignore the most central issue in religion—its spirituality.⁹

The historical religions are in all cases the public expression of an inner experience of the sacred.¹⁰

The work of the Alister Hardy Centre in Oxford has shown that 50% of adult Britons have experienced some sort of direct religious awareness. [p. 217](#) Half of these never attend a place of worship and quite often do not want to associate their experience with a particular religion. The approach in question posits a common thread in all religions and in much non-religious experience and goes on to assume that this thread, identified as spirituality or experience of the sacred, can be made accessible to pupils independently of a particular religion and without favouring any religion. It is as if the authors are trying to find a neutral 'spiritual' standpoint, as opposed to a rational standpoint, from which one may begin to survey the various religious perspectives.

THE PATH OF AWARENESS

The method used to gain access to the spiritual is that of raising awareness. The main body of *New Methods* is concerned with classroom activities and consists of six chapters. The first and last are entitled 'Getting Started' and 'Endings'. The other four all contain the word 'awareness': 'Raising Awareness', 'Embodying Awareness', 'Framing Awareness' and 'Extending Awareness'. Religion becomes a 'gloss' on the real thing which is the 'awareness' or the engagement with the 'spiritual'. The fear of favouring one religion has meant the relegation of religion; the concern for engagement has meant that 'the medium has become the message'.

I propose now to look at the concept of spirituality presented by this approach in an attempt to assess its independence of any particular outlook. The authors write:—

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Contemporary developments in spirituality in Britain are extremely rich and varied, drawing not only upon cross-fertilisation between Europe and Asia, but also on a sophisticated use of the techniques of psychoanalysis, an understanding of humanistic psychology and a recovery of the arts of spiritual direction, or the following of a guide or guru.¹¹

The parameters of teacher training are certainly going to have to be broadened to encompass this experience! The link between spirituality and psychoanalysis is not drawn out but the emphasis on awareness noted above has its counterpart in psychoanalysis and so there is an obvious link there. The fact that there are different schools of psychotherapy and how one might choose between them is not discussed. Some of the exercises both in the book and on the courses remind me of encounter group techniques where the aim is to become aware of the hidden depths of one's psyche. From a psychotherapist's p. 218 point of view the aim is to heal damage. It is difficult to see what relevance this might have to R.E. However, the exercises do relate quite closely to the mystical or contemplative tradition in religion. The phrase 'spiritual direction' refers to growth in a particular faith or aspect of a faith and the following of a guru would be understood to imply a Hindu or Buddhist path of exploration. Yet it is insisted that such spirituality is held in common by all religions. The authors write:—

We are caught up in an endless round of remembering past events or wondering what we have to do next. From the religious person's point of view, this low level of awareness is a kind of blindness which gets in the way of important exercises like prayer, meditation or ritual.¹²

Self-awareness techniques are said to be:

of crucial importance in the inner life of the religious person and developed to very high levels of sophistication in many of the religions of the world.¹³

It would seem that the exercises in self-awareness are seen as a way-in to the mystical tradition in religion. But here there seems to be an assumption made: that mystical experience is the same across the board. However, R. C. Zaehner, once Professor of Eastern Religions at the University of Oxford, insists that there are different kinds of mysticism and Ninian Smart says the same thing in 'The Religious Experience of Mankind'.¹⁴

These exercises in self-awareness are introduced to the pupils without any specific direction. This is in line with the aims of impartiality and of allowing the pupils to direct their own responses. They are to be told repeatedly that any response is permitted. Yet in the art of spiritual direction the novice is always under the guidance of an experienced person who can help to interpret and direct according to the received wisdom of the tradition. It is acknowledged that there are pitfalls along the way. Yet in the approach in question pupils are inducted into consciousness raising without any such safeguards—even though the methods outlined in the book and those I experienced on the courses do show great sensitivity. The pupils themselves must interpret and guide their experiences. This seems naive and dangerous. Zaehner warns of the dangers of a type of nature

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Fontana, 1971), p. 681.

mysticism in which an experience of the cosmic consciousness of the 'all is one and one is all' type predominates. This has its roots in Eastern mysticism p. 219 and Persian Sufism and it teaches of a timeless state of being which transcends good and evil. This may encourage in certain cases an indifference to the usual distinction between right and wrong and with tragic results. In 1969 the world was shocked by the revelations at the trial of Charlie Manson for the murder of Sharon Tate and others. Zaehner argues that Manson acted as much as a result of his experiences of mysticism as of his trips on drugs. He continues:—

He (Manson) is no doubt an exceptional case, but there have been other murderers since in California who have interpreted Eastern mysticism in just this way ... there is a moral ambivalence both in neo-Vedanta and Zen ... and in our everyday world this can have disastrous results.¹⁵

In his *The Dust of Death*,¹⁶ Os Guinness discusses mysticism and its connection with religion and drug-taking. He cites the case of Timothy Leary whose aim was the expanding of consciousness and for whom the taking of drugs was secondary to this purpose. Leary's descriptions of the six levels of consciousness are not far removed from the type of awareness recommended by this approach to R.E.

One cannot of course accuse the authors of this approach of advocating this type of mysticism. The problem is that their concern not to appear to be favouring any particular brand opens the doors to the more unhealthy branches of the mystical art. In this respect, the basic premise of *New Methods* is flawed.

I have argued here that a degree of neutrality has been achieved by this approach. But this is probably debatable. Kathy Raban honestly admits in her essay on guided imagery and R.E. that it is difficult to avoid allowing one's own beliefs to influence the way in which one conducts a fantasy journey. She conducted a fantasy on the theme of darkness and light, in which she suggested that the integration of the two was a good thing. This was disputed by some Christians who felt that there could be no union of good with evil. However, she does not go on to discuss whether or not one can conduct such an exercise without one's beliefs affecting the content. She assumes that by means of scrupulous integrity such a 'crime' will be avoided. This unexamined assumption is found throughout the book.

THE SEARCH

What else is said about this inner experience or spirituality which is said to be at the heart of religion? Words like 'engagement', the p. 220 'struggle', the 'journey', even the 'basic bewilderment' mentioned in the quotation with which the book ends all come to mind. Teachers are to seek to be 'facilitators' rather than imparters of knowledge. 'Uncertainty' seems to have become a virtue. In this context, the use of the word 'story' is instructive. Religions are said to offer 'stories' which help their followers to find meaning. They 'face up to the most fundamental of all questions ... and they do so by telling a story'.¹⁷ Religious

¹⁵ R. C. Zaehner, *Our Savage God* (Collins, 1974), p. 15.

¹⁶ Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (IVP, 1973).

¹⁷ *New Methods in R.E.*, p. 138.

language is metaphorical and thus beliefs are 'simply the vehicles we use to articulate experience'.¹⁸ We have to come to terms with 'the basic bewilderment'.

When a story is told in which the believer claims to know the truth, such a believer is presented in a poor light. It is not stated but there seems to be a strong implication that such a person is not spiritual. In the following story, the Christian is presented as inferior to the Master of Zen:—

A Christian once visited a Zen Master and said, 'Allow me to read you some sentences from the Sermon on the Mount.' 'I shall listen to them with pleasure', said the Master. The Christian read a few sentences and looked up. The Master interrupted and said, 'The man who pronounced those words could truly be called a saviour of mankind.' The Christian was thrilled. He continued to read to the end. The Master then said, 'That sermon was pronounced by a man who was radiant with divinity.' The Christian's joy knew no bounds. He left, determined to return and convince the Zen Master that he should himself become a Christian. On the way back home he found Christ standing by the roadside. 'Lord,' he said enthusiastically, 'I got that man to confess that you are divine!' Jesus smiled and said, 'And what good did it do to you except to inflate your Christian ego!'.¹⁹

The Zen Master appears to be more spiritual because he is willing to learn from others whereas the Christian is seen as closed to further enlightenment because he knows the truth. The former is open-minded and tolerant, the latter arrogant and intolerant. However, had the Christian done his research more thoroughly, he would have realized that the Zen Master was only rehearsing his basic beliefs in recognizing another guru in the man Jesus. He would surely have been far from tolerant of the claim of Christ to be Lord and Master.

Such a spirituality that lays great value on the search tends to [p. 221](#) devalue those religions that claim to offer certain truth. Thus it is a spirituality that has more in common with the Eastern religions, particularly the Buddhist tradition with its stress on the need for strenuous individual discipleship in search of enlightenment. It is in accord too with the Buddhist belief that truth lies beyond individual religions. This aspect is brought out in a story called 'The Devil and his Friend'. In this story the devil is not disturbed by the fact that a man finds a piece of truth lying by the roadside. He will allow him to make a religious belief out of it. Religious beliefs are thus seen in this approach as distorting the truth rather than presenting it.

Man as intellectual, man as moral, man as under the authority of absolute laws, man as responsible for the creation ... all these aspects have no place in this spirituality. It is as if by locating the heart of religion in some esoteric, psychological experience that religion has been reduced to just that. Bonhoeffer in his Nazi prison foresaw the reduction of religion in this way and he rejected a spirituality that identified man's essential nature with his interior life. He wrote:—

The 'heart' in the biblical sense is the whole man in relation to God ... I am anxious that God should not be relegated to some last secret place ... that we should give up all our clerical subterfuges and our regarding of psychotherapy and existentialism as precursors of God!²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ This story is not in the book but it was used on one of the courses which I attended.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (S.C.M., 1953), p. 118.

The requirement of phenomenology that judgement on the truth of a religion be suspended has proved a serious obstacle to the realization of the second aim of R.E.: that of encouraging spiritual development. It can give no reasons for choosing one type of spiritual development or even for getting to the starting post. It can offer no guidance since to do so would be to favour one approach rather than another. In order to overcome this impasse an assumption is made which can be approached by the use of self-awareness techniques. This overlooks the fact that some awareness exercises may be harmful. It also enables a particular view of spirituality to be advocated, one that tends towards the practice of Zen. Thus, on the one hand, an appearance of neutrality is maintained whilst in reality a preference for a particular view is conveyed. That this preference undermines traditional Christian faith should be a cause of concern to Christians. p. 222

The following words of Ninian Smart make an apt comment with which to finish:—

By removing religion, and spiritual enlightenment from the sphere of intellectual thinking, Zen appeals to those who find doctrines difficult and unfortunate.... Zen might have a special attraction to those in the vanguard of the creative arts ... it can be practised by anyone. It is adapted to everyday living. It promises a break with deadly routine. It harmonizes with the existentialist ethic. We make up our values as we go along.²¹

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Journal and Book Information

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Published by Christian Literature Society, Post Box 501, Madras 600 003, India on behalf of the Sadhu Sundar Singh Trust.

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A quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion published by Regent College, 5800 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 2E4. Price \$14.

The Evangelical Quarterly

Published quarterly by Paternoster Periodicals, 3 Mount Radford Crescent, Exeter EX2 4JW. Editor I. Howard Marshall. Price £14.80 per year. North American Subscription Office: Paternoster Periodicals, Subscription Office, PO Box 11127, Birmingham, AL 35202, USA.

St. Marks Review

Published by St. Marks Theological College, Canberra A.C.T. Australia.

²¹ Ninian Smart (1971), p. 680.

Spectrum

Published January and July by Paternoster Periodicals on behalf of the Association of Christian Teachers. Details for subscription see Evangelical Quarterly above. Price £10.20 per year, 50% discount for developing countries.