

SP401 – Spirituality: An Introduction – Assignment 1

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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The understanding and practice of Christian spirituality has changed over time and has been influenced by theology and culture. In some ways, Christian spirituality is different things to different people. Elements of Christian spirituality should include that it is other-worldly, manifests itself in this world, and will continue beyond this world. It is experiential, and holds in tension contemplation and action. In addition, it is expressed in the community of believers as well as in the world at large. These aspects are discussed in more detail below.

Definition

According to a definition by Sandra M. Schneiders, spirituality involves self-transcendence. In Christian spirituality, self-transcendence is actualised by the Holy Spirit within. God initiates a personal relationship with a person through Christ by the power of the Spirit. Spirituality is the response to this inner call of God as perceived by the individual.¹

Christian spirituality can also be seen as a journey toward increasing holiness or following Jesus on his journey to the Father in faith, surrender and self-giving, which is love. Directed toward God, it involves growth in one's union with God. In relation to fellow humans, it involves morality and ethics, and is manifested in expressing love to others in everyday activities.²

According to the apostle Paul, Christian spirituality is a way of life where one's whole life is led by the Holy Spirit as opposed to the inclinations of the sinful nature. This Spirit-influenced, or divine, nature manifests itself in the fruit of the Spirit including love, patience,

kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.³ Another writer defined the Christian life or spirituality as “the praxis of discipleship – doing in our world what Jesus did in his world”.⁴

History

The concept of Christian spirituality has undergone a long and varied development, being influenced by the prevailing thought of the time. Paul’s biblical definition was in about the 12th century modified by dualism with its disdain for the bodily in preference to things of the spirit.⁵

Another significant shift in the view of Christian spirituality came with the rise of Protestantism. At that time spirituality and sanctification moved from the cloister (the ascetic / monastic model of renunciation spirituality, dominant much of the time in church history) to ordinary life in the world and from male elite to lay individuals of both genders (a “householder spirituality”).⁶

In recent decades, the term spirituality has acquired a broader usage – a more ecumenical one, rather than exclusively Catholic. It has replaced such expressions as devotion, piety, and spiritual life.⁷ A contemporary view of Christian spirituality is making a shift from otherworldliness to immanence; from a patriarchal, dominating and dualistic model for Christian character to a gender-integrated ideal for character together with gender equality; and from emphasis on obedience to authority to relationships based on respect and mutuality.⁸

Theology

A person’s theology will determine their spirituality. Hence, even though the varieties of Christian spirituality have their origins in the Bible, the interpretations or emphases have

varied among the different Christian traditions. Some have taken their spirituality clues from the apostle Paul, some from the gospels, and some from the letters of Peter or James.⁹

The foundation of all Christian spirituality, however, needs to be Trinitarian. It must begin with God's special grace or call, the person's response in repentance, and the supernatural new birth and union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. This happens in the context of communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the Body of Christ or the church. Unless people are touched in a special way by the Holy Spirit – in addition to the grace in which all “live and move and have our being”, and God's self-revelation through nature and experience – the message of salvation is to them a stumbling block or foolishness.¹⁰

Experience

Christian spirituality is based in total life experience – be it in family, parish, vocation, church worship, or personal prayer or contemplation.¹¹ Spirituality for a Christian is a way of life and can be a continuous encounter with God for those who, in the words of Ignatius, are able to “find God in all things”.¹² The Christian spirituality experience specifically includes the pursuit of the highest Christian ideal – an intensifying union with God disclosed in Christ through life in the Spirit.¹³ It is this union with God that is then manifested in love and service to others.

Both spirituality and experience are individual and unique to each person. They are influenced by each other as well as by a person's past, knowledge, beliefs, desires, and even the conditions of the present moment, such as weather or state of mind. In addition, there are psychological, sociological and cultural dimensions to both spirituality and experience.¹⁴

Religious experience of mystery by itself is not sufficient for Christian spirituality, and neither is theology or the gospel. Both need to work together so that the experience can be correctly interpreted and the message leads to being convicted by the Holy Spirit to appropriately respond to God's self-communication.¹⁵

Contemplation and Ecclesial Involvement

To develop a healthy spirituality requires both solitude and interaction with others – contemplation as well as an awareness of the cohesion of all life in God. Through personal contemplation, God is encountered within. Community and interaction with others is a place of personal revelations of such things as anger, intolerance, etc. and the resulting need of constant grace and forgiveness. Community fosters an outward-reaching spirituality and a sense of interrelatedness and co-responsibility with the creation and all mankind. In the Christian community Jesus may be encountered in each individual as well as in the community as a whole, and the height, depth, breath and length of God's mystery better appreciated.¹⁶

While there are some negative aspects to ecclesial organizations which being human are by nature imperfect, they are nonetheless God-ordained and serve a vital role in development of Christian spirituality. History has shown that life in the Spirit is best found and actualized through submission to tradition and contact with others. Church institutions preserve life's balance between stability and novelty as well as maintaining each person's link with history and fellow humans. They also promote group consciousness and discipline, as well as passing on culture.¹⁷

In addition, through their continuity, churches transmit accumulated spiritual information on which others can build. As a result of authority, group suggestion and example,

beneficial behaviour modification occurs through motivation and imitation. Interacting with others of different ages, abilities and interests fosters virtues such as sacrifice, tolerance, humility and forgiveness. The cultus and ritual are instrumental in passing on values, opening eyes to the otherwise unperceivable, and building loyalty and solidarity among the community members.¹⁸

Christianity and hence Christian spirituality involves community through and in Jesus Christ. A Christian needs others and comes to others through Jesus Christ. The goal of the community is to bring the message of salvation to the world and to learn to love brothers in Christ.¹⁹

Involvement in the World

Christian spirituality should be not only individual and ecclesial, but also include outside community and cosmic dimensions because the world's institutions, the environment, and the created order are vital aspects of human life and the Christian journey to God. A proper relationship between humans and the creation is important since everything in the universe is interconnected.²⁰

Spirituality is also connected with social justice. By combining the two, both become transformative processes. Through spiritual practices – meditation, prayer and liturgical ritual – individuals become more loving and mature as well as more psychologically and spiritually integrated. Through active pursuit of justice, social groups are brought into right relationships with each other – transformed from violence, oppression and domination to peace, freedom and partnership. While both transformative journeys of spirituality and justice include risk and suffering as well as requiring courage, perseverance and support from others, their integration also graces the world and the church with life-giving energies.²¹

Transcendence and Immanence

Christian spirituality is a response to God's grace or self-communication through the Holy Spirit and as such has transcendent origin. Through the integration of faith, love and action at all human levels under the empowerment of God's Spirit, it is immanent. The end of Christian spirituality is bringing to fulfilment the eschatological and transcendent kingdom of God.²²

In conclusion, Christian spirituality is a dynamic entity that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit continues to develop to meet the needs of God's people in the pluralistic world. The challenge for spiritual leaders is to direct Christians to a balanced spirituality that is based on sound biblical theology, holds in tension the transcendence and immanence of God as well as contemplation and action, and is ecclesial as well as concerned for the world.²³

Christian grace-empowered spirituality should be flexible enough to cater for the uniqueness of each person or group, and should serve the needs of all people including women, children, and the suffering. It should also be holistic, involving all of life; ecumenical without sacrificing grounding in a particular tradition; promote growth in love, humility and prayer; and be eschatological in moving toward the universal reign of God.²⁴ (1514 words)

End Notes

¹ William G. Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development, and Holiness," *Review for Religious* 51, no. 5 (1992): 649-50

² David Walker, "Holiness: Pattern or Journey?" *Australasian Catholic Record* LXVI, no. 1 (1989): 20-21, 24, 26

³ Walter H. Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 931. See also Gal 5:16-25 and 2 Pet 1:4-8.

- ⁴ Robert Haight, "Grace," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 462.
- ⁵ Principe, "Spirituality, Christian", 932.
- ⁶ Ursula King, "Spirituality, Society and Culture," *The Way Supplement*, no. 73 (1992): 20.
- ⁷ Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," 932.
- ⁸ Anne Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection," *The Way Supplement*, no. 63 (1988): 110-111.
- ⁹ Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," 932.
- ¹⁰ The following scriptures show that saving grace is special and in addition to the grace available to all mankind in which "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:26-28). Those so graced have been predestined and chosen to be the firstfruits of salvation (Eph 1:3-14; Jas 1:18; Rev 14:4). They have been enlivened from being spiritually dead in sins and their eyes have been opened to God's special revelation (Eph 2:4-10; Mt 13:11-17; 16:16-17, 20; 1 Cor 1:21-24). They have been drawn and called to reconciliation with God and into the grace and fellowship of Christ (Jn 6:44; 2 Cor 5:18-20; 1 Cor 1:4-9; Gal 1:6, 15-16). Upon belief in Christ as their Savior, they have repented of their sins, been baptized, and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-41). Through the Holy Spirit (or Jesus) in them, they have become God's children, born of the Spirit (Jn 1:9-13; 3:5-16; 1 Pet 1:1-5, 23). All this is entirely God's doing and grace – without any human say or merit except for faith and acceptance of the divine invitation (Rom 3:21-28; Eph 2:8-9; 2 Tim 1:8-10; Tit 3:5). The Holy Spirit is a guarantee of divine sonship and of a resurrection to glory and immortality upon Christ's return to earth (Rom 8:9-17, 22-23; 1 Cor 15:50-57; Mt 24:30-31.)
- ¹¹ Dolores R. Leckey, "The Experience of God in Everyday Life," *The Way Supplement*, no. 60 (1987): 15-17
- ¹² William A. Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God. A Theological Enquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 25.
- ¹³ Michael Downey, "Spiritual Writing, Contemporary," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 917
- ¹⁴ William A. Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God. A Theological Enquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) 34.
- ¹⁵ Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) 61-62.
- ¹⁶ J. Philip Newell, "Spirituality, Community and an Individualistic Culture," *The Way Supplement*, no. 84 (1995): 122-123, 125, 127-128
- ¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, "Institutional Religion and the Life of the Spirit," in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Mowbray, 1994), 122-125.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 130-132, 134-135
- ¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Community," in *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 10-13.
- ²⁰ David Walker, "The Christian and the Environment," *Australasian Catholic Record* LXVIII, no. 1 (1991): 31-32.
- ²¹ Linda Rich, "Living Our Liberation Through Justice and Spirituality," *Review for Religious* 49, no. 6 (1990): 819-820.
- ²² Haight, "Grace," 461-464
- ²³ James J. Bacik, "Contemporary Spirituality," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 229-231
- ²⁴ Allan H. Sager, "A Spirituality for Our Times," in *Gospel Centered Spirituality. An Introduction to Our Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 76,82-84

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