

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

By Alexander Peck

A religious paradigm shift is now in progress in western culture, described by Anne Patrick in “Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection”.¹ The implications for Christian spirituality are significant.

This article first defines Christian spirituality, and then draws on Patrick’s description of the new religious paradigm as its organizing principle in addressing the question, “What is Christian spirituality?” Ten aspects of Christian spirituality are covered.

A Definition of Christian Spirituality

To begin with, of the many definitions of spirituality, Sandra Schneiders provides one of the most encompassing: Spirituality is “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives”.² For Christians, the ultimate concern is God revealed in Jesus Christ, and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit.³ Self-transcendence moves one out of compulsive, addictive, obsessive patterns of behavior toward more healthy relationships with oneself, other persons, and God.⁴ In short, Christian spirituality is the conscious human response to God that is both personal and ecclesial – it is life in the Spirit.⁵

Immanence of God

Christian spirituality is underpinned by the understanding that God is immanent – involved in the world, and acting through people.⁶ He is immanent in all relationships.⁷ By contrast, the older view experienced God as remote, outside of the world, and acting over

people⁸ – and spirituality was seen as a matter between the “soul” and God.⁹ For the believer today, then, God is both transcendent to this universe *and* immanent in it. This God, present through grace, is the backdrop and the horizon for the believer’s everyday life.¹⁰ Because of God’s immanence, He is always encounterable.¹¹ The experiences of grace in life are experiences of God in that they are movements within of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus – and they are the ways in which the immanent God speaks through persons and events.¹²

Liberating God-Consciousness

Christian spirituality involves a relational, liberating God-consciousness.¹³ The notion of *respect* – rather than only *control* – for created reality is fundamental.¹⁴ In this context, men and women are equal partners in the human community.¹⁵ Formerly, a “patriarchal” God-consciousness influenced spirituality,¹⁶ marked by patterns of domination and subordination.¹⁷ This aspect of Christian spirituality can also be termed apostolic spirituality. It refers to an understanding and integration of one’s life in terms of participation in the saving mission of Jesus, sent by God for the life of the world.¹⁸ At Nazareth, Jesus had proclaimed his mission: “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). Through an apostolic Christian spirituality, Christians participate consciously and explicitly in the mission of Jesus, sent by God to bring the human race to God’s intended fulfillment and liberation.¹⁹

God’s Relation to Creation

Christian spirituality recognizes that God’s relation to creation is one of energizing and nurturing.²⁰ The focus of religious devotion involves a stance of on-going commitment to the well-being (which is at once spiritual and material) of oneself and others. This

entails concern for building social relations of *respect, equality, and mutuality*, thus emphasizing the virtues of solidarity and justice.²¹ On the contrary, the older view saw God's relation to creation as one of domination and control,²² and the focus of religious devotion was the directing of one's energy to controlling bodily impulses and other people.²³ Furthermore, God's grace is mediated through created reality, as well as through the Church and its official sacraments.²⁴ Christian spirituality is therefore sacramental.

Grace

Christian spirituality is the life derived from grace²⁵ which implies God's presence and empowerment.²⁶ In the past, grace was essentially something needed for admittance into heaven.²⁷ Grace, however, can be regarded as another name for the "Spirit of God" (God's power immanent in the universe).²⁸ It is through grace that God initiates a personal relationship in and through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.²⁹ In this context, the model of all Christian spirituality must be Jesus himself.³⁰ Christian spirituality is reflected in how one responds to God's initiative in the challenges of daily life.³¹ Consequently, it is both incarnational and Trinitarian³² – that is, it concerns how a person lives in partnership with the action of the triune God in their life. In short, grace is God communicating himself to us in the Spirit, freely loving us, forgiving us, and inviting us into relationship with him.³³ This gift of God, present in grace, is an integral part of Christian spirituality – the experience of a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Historical Affirmation

Christian spirituality is "this-worldly" since God values mankind's existence, which in turn fills history with intrinsic meaning.³⁴ The older perspective, by contrast, emphasized otherworldliness – denigrating earthly existence to mainly a "testing period"

preliminary to “real” fulfillment in the afterlife.³⁵ From a faith point of view, spirituality must form part of the history of divine-human interaction, a breakthrough of the spirit into history.³⁶ Patricia Natali summarizes this thought: “If we are following Jesus who became involved in history and all its conflicts, we cannot just follow him in quiet places like deserts and mountaintops. Jesus went from quiet places to situations of turmoil”.³⁷ If God is in all things, then He is present in history.

Totality of Christian Experience

Christian spirituality is an activity of human life as such,³⁸ and therefore concerns the whole of human life at depth³⁹ – rather than being concerned mainly with prayer and spiritual exercises in an elitist and individualistic manner.⁴⁰ In other words, spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief,⁴¹ and embraces the whole human person (body, soul, spirit) – a person who is inculturated in place and time and so is affected by his or her personal and social history.⁴² Specifically, for Christian spirituality, there is a religious dimension to a person’s total experience which is supplied by the subject who believes and by the Mystery encountered.⁴³ Any experience, therefore, can be religious for the person because God is everywhere and because the religious person believes this of God and wants to meet him.⁴⁴ This supports the premise that Christian spirituality is experience-based – after all, a God who is not somehow experienced by a person would have very little interest for them.⁴⁵ In sum, Christian spirituality refers to the whole of the Christian’s life oriented to self-transcending knowledge, freedom, and love in light of the ultimate values and highest ideals perceived and pursued in the mystery of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit – that is, spirituality concerns everything that constitutes Christian experience.⁴⁶

Contemplation in Action

Christian spirituality embraces contemplation in action, which stresses the social constitution of the person and the social dimension of human freedom – as opposed to privatization and individualism.⁴⁷ For some in the past, the pursuit of spirituality occurred in the cloister – a separation from mainstream society.⁴⁸ Today, the locus of sanctification is seen in ordinary life in the world with its day-to-day relationships and responsibilities – a new “spirituality-of-being-in-the-world” has developed.⁴⁹ However, a contemplative attitude is not incompatible with action, with creative work, and with dedicated love.⁵⁰ In fact, traditionally, the ideas of prayer, meditation, and contemplation have been associated with a deepening of one’s personal life, and this expansion has resulted in the greater capacity to understand and serve others.⁵¹ Contemplation of Christ and a personal encounter with neighbor, especially the poor, become one spiritual act.⁵² In looking ahead, the spirituality of the future “must permeate the personal and political, it must animate our thought, action and imagination so that we can work for the transformation of the whole world and all life within it . . . only a transformed action-oriented spirituality can respond to the hopes and agonies of our suffering world”.⁵³ In sum, contemplation must blend with “the Christian ideal of love in action – an engaged, compassionate, forgiving, courageous, and effective care for human beings in need”.⁵⁴ In other words, an integral spirituality always connects interior renewal with active service to others.⁵⁵

Social Justice

Christian spirituality has at its heart a concern for social justice, recognized as everyone’s responsibility – rather than relegating spirituality to the cloister⁵⁶ and letting individualism supply a rationale for avoiding concern for social change.⁵⁷ Reflection about justice recognizes that it can no longer be assumed that social and economic patterns are

basically good, much less divinely established.⁵⁸ Economic and social relationships that are far from respectful of the humanity of persons in subordinate positions cannot be left uncriticized.⁵⁹ Christian spirituality, one's relationship with God, becomes the unique element in Christian ethics – it can enrich ethics with a transcendent, holistic focus based on our essential relatedness to God and consequently to all of life.⁶⁰ In fact, spirituality and justice are two ways of talking about the same thing, twin aspects of the way we respond to God.⁶¹ Christian spirituality is not simply private devotionism.⁶² Micah 6:8 exemplifies this integration by instructing one to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God.⁶³ Abraham Heschel refers to God as the God of pathos – active, engaged, involved, combining absolute selflessness with a supreme concern for the poor and exploited.⁶⁴ Both spirituality and justice are journeys into freedom, moving from being bound to a more free state.⁶⁵ Interestingly, both are needed in conjunction with each other to have true justice and true spirituality – because either of these in isolation from the other is destructive.⁶⁶ Spirituality and social justice are a graced dynamic, and split off from each other renders both of them ineffective, irrelevant, and destructive.⁶⁷ However, when these two are integrated, the world and the Christian community are graced with life-giving energies.⁶⁸

Reconciliatory Approach

Christian spirituality is reconciliatory in its approach – it affirms both poles of tensions.⁶⁹ For instance, contact with the transcendent God in prayer and other cultic activity does not “leave the world behind” but rather bestows a depth and seriousness precisely to one's life in this world.⁷⁰ Likewise, body-soul dualism is rejected, and spirituality is seen as involving bodily existence in the world according to the Spirit of God.⁷¹ Also, the individual is not emphasized without due regard for social context.⁷²

Finally, the more objective pole, divine reality and transcendence, is held in tension with the more subjective side of experience, immanence, inwardness, spiritual awareness, and the discovery of the true, spiritual self.⁷³ In contrast, the older spirituality had a tendency to affirm one half of a polar tension at the expense of the other.⁷⁴ For example, divine transcendence over God's immanence; the spiritual over the physical and material; contemplation over action; and the individual over the social context.⁷⁵

Inclusiveness

Christian spirituality has become a broad, inclusive term.⁷⁶ There is appreciation for an inter-faith, ecumenical spirituality – that is, the spiritualities of Catholics and Protestants, non-theistic religious traditions, and even non-Christians.⁷⁷ Spirituality no longer mainly refers to the spiritual life of a religious minority who are striving for perfection through a life of prayer and virtue beyond the “ordinary” believer.⁷⁸ Rather, it now focuses on the human spirit of believers and non-believers, on their lives as a whole – that is, on the physical and emotional, the intellectual and social, the political and cultural, and the secular and religious dimensions of their lives.⁷⁹ In fact, there is a growing consensus in recognizing that Christian spirituality is a subset of a broader category that is neither confined to nor defined by Christianity or even by religion.⁸⁰ To clarify, however, if spirituality involves engagement with the Absolute, then it is religious; if the engagement is in the person of Jesus Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit, then the spirituality is Christian.⁸¹

In sum, Christian spirituality (the spiritual life) is at the same time experiential, apostolic, sacramental, incarnational, Trinitarian, christological, ecclesial, and ecumenical. The challenge is to maintain a balanced Christian spirituality that has a proper sense of the transcendence of God.⁸² Today, 21st-century humanity has a profound and authentic desire for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life, and for values that endure.⁸³ Human beings are spirit in the world⁸⁴ and it is through an integral Christian spirituality that their “hungering and thirsting” can be satisfied and quenched.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Anne Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection", *The Way Supplement* 63 (1988): 107-112.
- ² Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy", *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 684.
- ³ William Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness", *Review for Religious* 51, no. 5 (1992): 648.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), 37.
- ⁶ Marie Augusta Neal, *The Just Demands of the Poor: Essays in Socio-Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 77; quoted in Anne Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection", *The Way Supplement* 63 (1988): 109.
- ⁷ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 108.
- ⁸ Neal, *The Just Demands of the Poor*, 77.
- ⁹ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 108.
- ¹⁰ Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 59.
- ¹¹ William Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Enquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 41.
- ¹² Edwards, *Human Experience of God*, 59.
- ¹³ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 108.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 110.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 108.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 110.
- ¹⁸ M. Milligan, "Apostolic Spirituality", in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 51.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 56.
- ²⁰ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 108.
- ²¹ Ibid., 110.
- ²² Ibid., 108.
- ²³ Ibid., 110.
- ²⁴ James Bacik, "Contemporary Spirituality", in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 220.
- ²⁵ Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy", 682.
- ²⁶ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 109.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness", 649.
- ³⁰ David Walker, "Holiness: Pattern or Journey", *Australasian Catholic Record* LXVI, no. 1 (1989): 23.
- ³¹ Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness", 649.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Edwards, *Human Experience of God*, 58.
- ³⁴ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 109.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ursula King, "Spirituality, Society and Culture", *The Way Supplement* 73 (1992): 16.
- ³⁷ Patricia Natali, "Integrating Spirituality and Justice", *Review for Religious* 48, no. 3 (1989): 432.
- ³⁸ Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy", 682.
- ³⁹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 52.
- ⁴⁰ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 104.
- ⁴¹ Bradley Hanson, *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays* (Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 47. Here Hanson draws on the work by Bernard McGinn entitled *Christian Spirituality I* ("Introduction", p. xv).
- ⁴² W. Principe, "Spirituality, Christian", in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. M. Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 932.
- ⁴³ Barry, "The Religious Dimension of Experience", 23.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.

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- ⁴⁶ Michael Downey, ed., "Spiritual Writing, Contemporary", in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 917.
- ⁴⁷ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 111-112.
- ⁴⁸ King, "Spirituality, Society and Culture", 20.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 133; quoted in Jean Leclercq, "Action and Contemplation: Two Ways Toward the Ultimate Reality", in *Spirituality in Ecumenic Perspective*, ed. E. G. Hinson (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 63-82.
- ⁵¹ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 157f.
- ⁵² Natali, "Integrating Spirituality and Justice", 432.
- ⁵³ King, "Spirituality, Society and Culture", 22-23.
- ⁵⁴ Bacik, "Contemporary Spirituality", 223.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.
- ⁵⁶ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 112.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ James Keating, "Spirituality and the Moral Life", *Spiritual Life* 36, no. 1 (1990): 37.
- ⁶¹ Natali, "Integrating Spirituality and Justice", 432.
- ⁶² Keating, "Spirituality and the Moral Life", 37.
- ⁶³ Natali, "Integrating Spirituality and Justice", 432.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Here Patricia Natali refers to Heschel's work, *The Prophets*, Harper and Row, New York, 1962, p. 271.
- ⁶⁵ Linda Rich, "Living Our Liberation Through Justice and Spirituality", *Review for Religious* 49, no. 6 (1990): 819-820.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 820.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 111.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ King, "Spirituality, Society and Culture", 17-18.
- ⁷⁴ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 111.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁶ Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness", 648.
- ⁷⁷ Patrick, "Ethics and Spirituality", 104.
- ⁷⁸ Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness", 648.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy", 683.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 682.
- ⁸² Bacik, "Contemporary Spirituality", 229.
- ⁸³ Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy", 696.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

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