

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**PRACTICAL ASSIGNMENT**

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## SRG405 – Formative Spirituality

### Assignment #2 – Practical Assignment

#### **Three Christian Odysseys and Spiritual Growth**

Rod, Tony, and Jeff are three English teachers at a Christian university with whom I have personally dialogued about their Christian journey. Their stories and dialogues reveal insights about the spiritual growth in their individual odysseys.

This paper, then, presents a descriptive assessment of the spiritual growth pattern of Rod, Tony, and Jeff. Ten indicators are used: behaviour, awareness, interiority, authority, motivation, prayer, transformation, self-assessment, selflessness, and service.<sup>1</sup> These indicators are described in relation to three domains: immaturity, conversion, and maturity.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Behaviour**

As I reflect on the conversations with Rod and Tony, I sense what David Walker describes when he writes that “behaviour is the focus of their attention. Their emphasis is on doing, on activity, and they are often unaware of interior activities, and unsympathetic to, even condemnatory of, those caught up with the interior life”.<sup>3</sup> Morality and keeping the commandments (obedience to law) – thereby avoiding mortal sin – comprise the crux of their Christian life. On the surface, their lives are exemplary. However, this may also be due to their religious context in life, together with the religious education received.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Jeff's behaviour seems to flow naturally and easily from his inner convictions – it is not something deliberately practiced.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, he relates well to others because there is no obvious uneasiness or awkward self-consciousness. Since his Christian actions flow freely from him, his Christian faith is effectively communicated to others. Also, Jeff is not preoccupied with many physical and material pursuits that less mature Christians can fall prey to. Rather, his life has a measure of simplicity.

### Awareness

Rod's and Tony's comments reflect two men living in God. They are aware of God's presence in their lives and live in a sanctified manner. Furthermore, as Ruysbroeck aptly writes “they are content, because they know and feel that their heart is set on God, and they desire, in all their works, to do the loving will of God”.<sup>6</sup> I surmise that their minds may be more preoccupied with works done than with an awareness of the God for whom they are done.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, in speaking and interacting with Jeff, I intuit an awareness of God that can be described as someone in whom God lives – a person who abandons themselves totally to God.<sup>8</sup> There is a natural awareness of God. His heart turns easily to God in the reality of ordinary everyday life.<sup>9</sup> I see how Jeff draws on the presence of God the power that is needed to meet the demands and challenges of daily life.<sup>10</sup>

## **Interiority**

Rod and Tony have an interior orientation. From my talks with them, I notice that they are living life on a deeper level – being reflective and able to live from personal convictions.<sup>11</sup> In other words, their actions are generally not being governed from without. As a result, I conclude that their works are, as David Walker writes, “now much more part of a deeper relationship with God, and a far more personal embodiment of their faith”.<sup>12</sup>

By comparison, through conversing with Jeff, I detect that his interiority is at a deeper level than that of Rod and Tony. I have come to appreciate his all-pervading awareness of God which is more intuitive. His interiority seems to reflect being “united to God in spirit, one with him in love and will”.<sup>13</sup> This is an interior orientation to life “that is not limited to prayer, but pervades one’s experience of God throughout life”.<sup>14</sup>

## **Authority**

I ascertain a faith perspective in Rod and Tony that Fowler labels as an individualistic-reflective faith.<sup>15</sup> They “take seriously the burden of responsibility for [their] own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes”<sup>16</sup> and have “left home” emotionally and geographically.<sup>17</sup> Their locus of meaning-making and values has moved inside within themselves.<sup>18</sup> From their comments, I can discern that they are personally making rational sense of their world.<sup>19</sup> In other words, a desire to rationally and critically examine values and norms with respect to themselves is apparent<sup>20</sup> rather than simply accepting their group norms.

By contrast, in relating to authority, I see in Jeff a faith that is described by Fowler as conjunctive.<sup>21</sup> He is aware that reality is complex and is therefore willing to view issues in life with an openness of mind, not being threatened by entering into meaningful dialogue with those of opposing view. He does not feel compelled to defend his worldview, but is interested in pursuing understanding as opposed to wanting explanations. His approach to multiple meanings and perspectives, as well as to tensions and polarities, is aptly described in Fowler's words as “porous and permeable”.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in talking with Jeff, I also note a reclaiming and reworking of his past in new light.

## Motivation

In commenting on Rod and Tony, Jeff remarked: “It is as though they are working *for God* [referring to active witnessing efforts, such as distributing religious tracts and talking to people about God], whereas a better or superior way is work *with God*”. This corroborates with Ruysbroeck’s observation that “by grace and God’s help, faithful servants choose to keep the commandments of God, that is, to be obedient to God and the Church in every form of virtue and good behaviour”.<sup>23</sup> Walker concludes that “there are consolations in religion at this stage, and these consolations can also be a motive for their action”.<sup>24</sup> I detect that this may be the case for Rod and Tony as far as their motivation.

In spending time with Jeff, I discern a different motivation from that of Rod and Tony. It is one where love is the source of his determination to do what his relationship with God calls for.<sup>25</sup> His motivation is a desire to share his experience of God with others. Mission and proclamation, therefore, motivates his actions. David Walker adds the thought that “this can

become an important motivation, as [his] actions are not only expression of [his] love for God, but are quite deliberately meant to bring God to others”.<sup>26</sup>

### **Prayer**

For Rod and Tony, prayer is more active and filled with images. Prayer is something determined by their activity, and plays an important role in their lives. Clearly, both men have turned their hearts to God, and prayer is a deliberate, consistent pattern in their lives.

By contrast, for Jeff, prayer tends to be less active and can be described as more passive in which the activity of God is more relied on. He is comfortable in being silent before and with God. However, in speaking with Jeff, he also confessed of periods when it was difficult to pray and he therefore experienced “the feelings of the absence of God”.<sup>27</sup> Such phases of aridity and dryness in prayer are, of course, a part of the mature believer’s experience. Overall, in Jeff’s experience, prayer has become second nature.

### **Transformation**

Rod and Tony have a sharp vision of their Christian calling and they recognize within themselves those areas where there are shortcomings. Hence religion has a priority in their lives which expresses itself in their willingness to give time, energy, and resources to religious endeavours.<sup>28</sup> I see the outcome of this in their Christian virtues and values, showing that their personal lives are being transformed.

Paradoxically, as one continues in the Christian faith, one’s vision does not become clearer. Rather, a struggle in faith is called for.<sup>29</sup> Jeff’s comments reflect this reality. Once he

quipped, “Back then [a time early in his Christian walk] I knew and understood everything; now I don’t know anything for certain”. Jeff fulfils what was expressed by David Walker, “our condition is basically one of faith, and the further we travel the more we are obliged to live by faith”.<sup>30</sup> Also, radical action may be necessary, for example, to truly root out selfishness. This is Jeff’s case where I have noticed significant steps in transformation.

### **Self-Assessment**

In my dialogue with Rod and Tony, I suspect that in their assessment of themselves that they may look at external behaviour. Certainly they are faithful to the morality and behaviour that they embrace. My conclusion, based on comments heard, is that they are somewhat hard on others who, in their mind, are not living up to the requirements of faith.<sup>31</sup> David Walker sums up the dilemma of such people when he writes: “The fact that they are doing well, opening up new areas in their life, and wanting to go on can disguise the fact that there may still be things unnoticed that can be holding them back from God”.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to this, I perceive a different orientation with Jeff. His selflessness, together with a genuine humility, results in a disposition that does not overestimate his relationship to God and others. Writing of such people, David Walker notes that “the acute awareness of their creatureliness before the Creator gives them a sense of being a sinner, which has the effect of them seeing themselves as the least of the brethren”.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Jeff expresses dismay about shortcomings that others would not deem important. Also, he never exalts himself over others, even though he surely recognizes what has been achieved in his spiritual journey.<sup>34</sup>

### **Selflessness**

In my dialogue with Rod and Tony, I perceive that they are going beyond their own self-interest in serving others. They commented on their works of service which evidence to me a heartfelt concern for others.

In contrast, Jeff selflessness is further developed. Interestingly, in the context of selflessness, his experience of God has enabled him, as David Walker states, “to become acutely aware of [his] own sinfulness before God; [his] creatureliness before the Creator”.<sup>35</sup> Jeff’s comments to me manifest this orientation. Additionally, I find Jeff amicable and congenial. Walker explains this approachability with insight: “This awareness of who they are before God helps them to relate to others, so that there is an understanding and empathy with others that enables these people to be close to them, and effective in serving them”. Consequently, a greater self-giving (without clinging to personal ego demands) is possible. Jeff has the ability to give of himself regardless of the situation – he gives rather than expecting to receive.

### **Service**

Rod and Tony display loving service that goes beyond self-interest. However, it is not an in-depth, selfless spirit of giving. At times, their service has certain parameters and boundaries. Nevertheless, in both Tony and Rod I note that “the deepening of their relationship with God is moving them more into the service of God and the community, as the Christian life is being seen more as directed to others”.<sup>36</sup> This growth is enabling them to

transcend self interest which in turn is empowering them to serve the interests of others. They are becoming the presence of Christ to those whom they are serving.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Jeff's life is characterized by mature selflessness – a self-giving shown in his approachability, no matter what the matter at hand or time of day. From deep within, he has a concern for others and is not afraid to share his experience of God with them whenever an opportunity arises. In Jeff, I observe a blending of the Martha and Mary roles, as David Walker notes when he states, “the more you become a Mary, the more you become a Martha”.<sup>38</sup>

In summary, based on my dialogue and interaction with three Christian English teachers – Rod, Tony, and Jeff – and using ten indicators for spiritual growth in three domains proposed by David Walker,<sup>39</sup> the following conclusions may tentatively be arrived at: Rod and Tony clearly portray the attitude and behaviour of converted brethren, while Jeff represents a mature Christian perspective.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Walker, “Stages of Growth”, in *SRG405 Formative Spirituality: Readings* (Pennant Hills, Australia: Broken Bay Institute, 2006), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>6</sup> Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Sparkling Stone*, trans. David Walker in *SRG405 Formative Spirituality: Readings* (Pennant Hills, Australia: Broken Bay Institute, 2006), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, “Stages of Growth”, 207.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Clifton Walters (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, “Stages of Growth”, 205-206.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*. In *SRG405 Formative Spirituality: Readings* (Pennant Hills, Australia: Broken Bay Institute, 2006) the page reference is 124.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Helminiak, *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 59.

<sup>18</sup> R. Mosley, D. Jarvis, and J. Fowler, “The Stages of Faith”, in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, ed. J. and F. L. Astley (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 51.

<sup>19</sup> Helminiak, *Spiritual Development*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Mosley, “The Stages of Faith”, 52.

<sup>21</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*. In SRG405 *Formative Spirituality: Readings*, 125.

<sup>23</sup> van Ruysbroeck, *The Sparkling Stone*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Walker, “Stages of Growth”, 203.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 197.

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