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Three Critical Reviews

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Principe, Walter H. “Broadening the Focus: Context as a Corrective Lens in Reading Historical Works in Spirituality”. In *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, 43-48. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Underlying Principe’s article is a hermeneutical principle: in all writings, it is important to go beyond the text itself to avoid misleading judgments and erratic responses. Partial insight and distortion of understanding result from exclusively focusing on the writings of an author or only on what is explicitly stated.

Principe suggests a two-fold definition for spirituality encountered in historical texts. On the one hand, an author’s spirituality may refer to the person’s real, *lived experience* – that is, how they lived in the Spirit. Or, it can refer to the person’s *teaching* on spirituality.

To more fully grasp the spirituality of a historical person, the reader or researcher must bring a number of questions to the task of reading the explicit writings of the individual.

Principe elaborates on the nature of the questions to be asked by building on his two-fold definition of an author’s spirituality. First, there is a need to locate the author’s spirituality in *time* and *space* – to situate the person in their history. Second, the *doctrine* or *teaching* contained in the person’s writings needs to be identified. These two tasks call for a broader and deeper analysis of context than often occurs.

While Principe argues convincingly about the necessity of context in satisfactorily responding to historical works in spirituality, a number of additional points would make his presentation more complete.

First, Principe could expand on his comments regarding interpretation of the *text* itself.

Literary criticism has shown that while words may seem familiar, the assumptions and experiences that lie behind the words may be different and consequently give the words a different significance.¹

Second, further emphasis may be given to the fact that, as Sheldrake states, “spiritualities are not beyond criticism and must be viewed as limited and conditioned.”² Also, noted could be that the tradition of interpretation of a historical work will affect the contemporary reading of it³ and such tradition may also need to be questioned.

Third, while historical context is integral for interpreting texts, there are limits to its value, a fact which Principe does not concede. Additionally, texts themselves interpret experience, rather than merely record it.⁴

Fourth, a single, true interpretation of a text does not exist.⁵ New aspects will be revealed as the text confronts new horizons and questions.⁶ Principe could comment further on the dialogue between text and reader. As Sheldrake notes, “a spiritual classic is not a timeless artefact that demands mere repetition.”⁷

Finally, Principe could have contrasted more specifically a “hermeneutics of consent” and a “hermeneutics of suspicion”.⁸ The latter recognizes that the *contemporary* situation may provoke criticism of certain theological and cultural assumptions.⁹

Schneiders, Sandra M. “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality”. In *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, 49-60. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

While Schneiders affirms the theological and historical-contextual approaches to the academic study of Christian spirituality, she proposes a *hermeneutical approach* as more adequate for the multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary nature of the subject matter.

However, Schneiders concedes that the academic setting determines the suitability of a particular approach.¹⁰ The strengths of Schneiders’ article include its logical and comprehensive treatment.

In developing her argument for the hermeneutical method, Schneiders presents two fundamental questions for academic study in the field of spirituality: (1) What is the object of the study? (2) What is the appropriate method? The object of spirituality as an academic discipline is the experience of the Christian spiritual life. The method deals with the approach to the study of spirituality for which a plurality of approaches is legitimate.

Notwithstanding, for Schneiders the most adequate is the *hermeneutical approach*. The primary aim of the discipline of spirituality is to understand the phenomena of the Christian spiritual life as experience. And since understanding of such phenomena is a function of interpretation, then an interpretational strategy is needed. Such hermeneutical procedure involves three phases: adequate description, critical analysis, and constructive interpretation. The hermeneutical methodology is necessarily inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and inter-religious. It involves, but is not subordinate to, biblical, historical, and theological content and methods.

Finally, Schneiders does not overlook the challenging role of practice and/or praxis in the academic study of spirituality by examining the formative and research spheres. The former involves personal appropriation, both intellectual and practical, of the tradition. The purpose of the latter is the expansion of knowledge in the field.

Having acknowledged the logic and value in Schneiders' argument for spirituality as a distinct discipline using a hermeneutical approach, some of her liabilities are as follows.

First, Schneiders views theology in a narrow sense. However, four characteristics that for her distinguish the discipline of spirituality from theology, actually also apply to contemporary theology (see detailed footnote).¹¹

Second, Schneiders needs to further address the inherent difficulties involved in the relationship between praxis and personal (practical) involvement, and maintaining theoretical integrity in the discipline of Christian spirituality.¹²

Third, while Schneiders acknowledges interrelated disciplines in relation to the discipline of Christian spirituality, she does not address the new challenges raised by the *pluralism* of theologies, philosophies, anthropologies, hermeneutics, linguistic theories, and so forth.¹³

Finally, Schneiders does not mention a critical guideline in the academic study of spirituality described by Principe as follows: "Christian spirituality must be guided by sound theology of the Trinitarian God, of creation, of the human person and human destiny, of sin, of Christ and his saving work, of the interplay of grace and human effort, of the sacraments – in a word, of all the mysteries of faith."¹⁴

Yarnold, Edward. “The Theology of Christian Spirituality”. In *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, 9-17. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Yarnold offers a theology of Christian spirituality presented under six sub-headings. These are: God the creator, human nature, sin, the grace of Christ, mystical prayer, and the dark night. His theological exposition of the six themes is detailed and biblically supported.

In the introduction to his article (published in 1986), Yarnold points the reader to his bibliography for further discussion of the topic. However, it features only nine other authors (with a number of dates of publication from the seventies). The article, therefore, is limited in scope and is now dated. It lacks the theological perspectives that have emerged during the past two decades in the field of Christian spirituality.

As a starting point, Yarnold uses Wainwright’s¹⁵ definition of spirituality as the “combination of praying and living”. This embodiment of prayer in life becomes the focus Yarnold’s spirituality – a spirituality that concentrates on the priesthood role of believers. In today’s post-modern context, this definition of Christian spirituality may be restricted and too narrow for some.

In reading Yarnold’s article, as he tackles the mega-subjects of God the Creator, human nature, sin, and the grace of Christ, his principal theme of a theology of Christian spirituality is not always apparent.

Moreover, in his reasoning, Yarnold tends to equate spirituality with prayer. He states, for example, that “all prayer, and therefore all spirituality, is the fruit of God’s grace” (p. 15). In fact, as one reads his last two sub-sections – mystical prayer, and the dark night – the

emphasis is on prayer, almost to the exclusion of spirituality. Even his concluding paragraph again emphasizes prayer and fails to integrate his original theme of a theology of Christian spirituality.

Notwithstanding, Yarnold's article – with its emphasis on the Christian life as a living sacrifice and priesthood – can be appreciated in the context of the many other varying traditions, schools, or varieties of Christian spirituality.¹⁶ Yarnold himself alerts the reader of this fact in his opening lines when he states that “each Church, and probably each theologian within each Church, would produce a different theology of spirituality” (p. 9). His bibliography, though incomplete, directs readers to different Christian traditions.

Finally, Yarnold does not overlook a vital dimension in a theology of Christian spirituality – that of a person's *lived experience*, at the real or existential level.¹⁷ He states that “whenever we act as responsible, loving persons, we are in the field of grace, and exercising our spiritual priesthood [which he equates with spirituality]” (p. 13).

In sum, while Yarnold's article has liabilities (particularly a dated perspective and a restricted theology of spirituality), his writing also has assets (especially in acknowledging the variety of Christian spiritualities and the lived experience of spirituality).

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Endnotes

¹ Philip F. Sheldrake, “Interpretation”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 549.

² *Ibid.*, 547.

³ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁴ *Ibid.* Sheldrake comments that “to allow for the interpreted nature of texts is not to reject the value of what results.”

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* Here Sheldrake gives the example of how nowadays we are “more aware of the *social* conditioning of texts and of the need to expose the hidden biases against certain ideas or groups of people within the history of spirituality.”

¹⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality”, in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 49-50. Specifically, Schneiders suggests the following: (1) for a single denomination seminary, the *theological* approach; (2) for a non-denominational divinity school, the *historical/contextual* approach; and, (3) for an inter-denominational and inter-religious graduate theological institution, the *hermeneutical* approach.

¹¹ Walter H. Principe, “Spirituality, Christian”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 936. Four characteristics that for Schneiders distinguish the discipline of spirituality from related fields of study are: (1) Spirituality is *interdisciplinary*, so that spirituality must use whatever approaches are relevant to the reality being studied. For Christian spirituality, these include at least biblical studies, history, theology, psychology, and comparative religion. (2) Spirituality is a *descriptive-critical* rather than prescriptive-normative discipline, that is, it is not the practical application of theoretical principles, theological or other, to concrete life experience. It is the critical study of such experience. (3) Spirituality is *ecumenical, inter-religious, and cross-cultural*. The context for study of spiritual experience is anthropologically inclusive, since Christianity is not presumed to exhaust or include the whole of religious reality. (4) Spirituality is a *holistic discipline* because it does not limit itself to explorations of the explicitly religious but examines all the elements integral to spiritual experience, e.g., the psychological, bodily, historical, social, political, aesthetic, intellectual, and other dimensions of the human subject of spiritual experience.

¹² Elizabeth Liebert, “The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality”, *Spinitus* 2:1 (Spring 2002): 30-49. <http://www.sfts.edu/faculty/liebert/essays/role_of_practice.asp> (3 December 2010). In an informative article, Liebert addresses this question.

¹³ Principe, “Spirituality, Christian”, 937. Another question arises as to whether hermeneutical theory deserves such a prominent role in the discipline of Christian spirituality?

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Principe adds that “competence is also needed regarding principles of moral life and moral decisions together with knowledge of the theology of prayer, virtues, gifts of the Spirit, etc.”

¹⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright is one of three editors of the book, *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The other two editors are Cheslyn Jones and Edward Yarnold himself.

¹⁶ Principe, “Spirituality, Christian”, 933. Principe elaborates further by stating that “each spiritual tradition or school seeks to model itself on the gospel but emphasizes different aspects of the gospel in teaching, practices, and forms of expression.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 932.