

SPIRITUALITY AND THE UNIVERSITY

Celia Kourie[♦]

Introduction¹

Without doubt, "spirituality" is in high demand; it is no longer a phenomenon discussed quietly and reservedly in church circles, but has increasingly entered the public arena. It is no longer limited to clergy, religious workers, theologians and theoreticians of religion, but on the contrary is a topic of discussion in the health profession;² by psychologists;³ in business;⁴ and in education⁵ – to mention but a few areas of research. Suffice it to say that spirituality has come into its own; publications in the field, both popular and scholarly, abound; courses on spirituality and retreats are in high demand; and centres

[♦]Celia Kourie is Professor of Christian Spirituality, *Dept of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology: School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Theology*, Unisa. In 2000 and 2001, Professor Kourie instituted the new degrees in Christian Spirituality at Unisa (DTh; MTh; and BTh Hons). Her research interests include inter-religious mysticism; mysticism and psychology; eastern mysticism; and secular spirituality. Recent publications: "Teaching Spirituality 2000-2010: Some Reflections," *Missionalia* 38,1 (2010) 17-31; "Contemporary Christian Spirituality and Postmodernism: A Fruitful Conversation? *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap/Journal for Christian Scholarship* 46, 3&4 (2010) 103-121 (co-authored with Dr T Ruthenberg); "A Mystical Reading of Paul," *Scriptura* 101, 2 (2009) 235-245. She is also a visiting Professor at St Augustine College of SA, where she teaches Mysticism, Dynamics of Spirituality and New Testament spirituality. Email: Kouricet@unisa.ac.za

¹Certain issues in the preliminary part of this article were first discussed in Kourie 2006a.

²B. McGinn, "Spirituality Confronts Its Future," *Spiritus: A Journal for Christian Spirituality* 5, 1 (2005) 88.

³T.W. Hall, & K.J. Edwards, "The Spiritual Assessment Inventory: A Theistic Model and Measure for Assessing Spiritual Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, 2 (2002) 341-358.

⁴K. Dollard, A. Marett-Crosby & T. Wright, *Doing Business with Benedict. The Rule of Saint Benedict and Business Management: A Conversation*, London: Continuum, 2002; Lowney, *Heroic Leadership*. San Francisco: Loyola Press, 2003.

⁵H. Alexander, ed. *Spirituality and Ethics in Education. Philosophical, Theological and Radical Perspectives*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004.

for the study of spirituality have been instituted to cater for this growing interest. In addition to the foregoing, the *academic study* of spirituality has come increasingly to the fore, and will be the main focus of discussion for this paper. It addresses, inter alia, such questions as the following: What is spirituality in general? What is Christian spirituality? How is Christian spirituality taught in the Academy? What methodological approaches are best suited to the academic study of spirituality?

Academic Study of Spirituality

The birth of the 'new' (yet ancient) discipline of spirituality is one of the most exciting endeavours for those involved. We are reminded of the introduction of the disciplines of sociology and psychology just over one hundred and fifty years ago; we tend to forget that these disciplines had to find their niche in the academy, and as is the case with spirituality, not without opposition and apprehension from the establishment. Not a few intellectual eye-brows have been raised in the esteemed corridors of the university, as a result of the introduction of spirituality into the revered halls of theology faculties and departments of philosophy and religion!

In addition to new degree programmes in spirituality at university level, new academic societies have arisen⁶ and specialised conferences on spirituality have been held. Furthermore, new journals are now published to meet the growing interest in the academic study of spirituality.⁷ Scholarly editions of ancient classics abound and there is a plethora of new publications in the growing field of spirituality. Waaijman speaks of the "explosion – in both lived spirituality and ... scholarly reflection" of the "global phenomenon" of spirituality, in contrast to the early twentieth century, where the "study of spirituality was almost completely restricted to the French catholic world."⁸ This is particularly seen in the publication of the 25 volume Crossroads series *World Spirituality*⁹ and other recent

⁶For example, the *Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* (SSCS) founded at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, 1992; *Spirituality Association of South Africa* (Spirasa) founded 2004.

⁷*Studies in Spirituality; Spiritus; The Way; Acta Theologica, Supplement 8, 2006: The Spirit that moves. Orientation and Issues in Spirituality.*

⁸K. Waaijman, "Spirituality: A Multifaceted Phenomenon – Interdisciplinary Explorations," *Studies in Spirituality* 17 (2007) 1.

⁹This series, not yet completed, covers the indigenous spiritualities of Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and South, Central and North America; Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Sumerian, Assyro-Babylonian, Hittite, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian and Islamic spiritualities; esoteric

publications.¹⁰ A new web community, SPIRIN, (Spirituality International) under the auspices of the Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen, provides an “academic forum, multi-disciplinary in structure and multicultural in approach” in which “scientists, lecturers, students and professionals in the field of spirituality are given an opportunity to exchange information and engage in discussion.”¹¹ Drawing on the disciplines of theology, religious studies, philosophy, literary sciences, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, education, management studies, medicine, and natural sciences, Waaijman states that “... the study of spirituality will profit by a growing sensitivity for the dimension of relationality. Relationality is the inner dynamic of all processes of divine-human transformation. This understanding will place the phenomenon of spirituality, as presented in texts and histories, in a new perspective.”¹² The question of inter-disciplinarity will be taken up below. Suffice it to say, for the present, that spirituality cannot be studied in isolation. It impacts on the totality of what it means to be human. Bearing this in mind, a short definition of spirituality in general and Christian spirituality in particular is now offered.

Defining Spirituality

Many definitions of spirituality abound; it has become an umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities, ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre. Its popular usage covers all sorts of beliefs and values, and its usage is often imprecise. It is helpful, therefore, to have a working definition that will encapsulate the essence of spirituality, particularly as the phenomenon of spirituality has such a firm grip on the contemporary psyche. Waaijman describes spirituality as that which touches the core of human existence, namely, “our relation to the Absolute,” however the latter may be defined.¹³ Spirituality can be seen as the concern of all who feel drawn to the “fullness of humanity” and is “the capacity of

and secular spirituality; inter-religious dialogue concerning spirituality; and a dictionary of world spirituality.

¹⁰Cf. Sheldrake, P (ed) 2005. *The New SCM Dictionary of Spirituality*. London: SCM Press; Holder, A (ed) 2005. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd; K. Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters, 2002.

¹¹J. Huls, & K. Waaijman, 2004. “Spirituality International (SPIRIN) – An Academic Community,” *Studies in Spirituality* 14 (2004) 357. This forum comprises six inter-connected areas: Who’s Who; Bibliography; Forum; Encyclopedia; Education; Bulletin Board & Links.

¹²Waaijman, “Spirituality: A Multifaceted Phenomenon...,” 113.

¹³Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms...*, 1.

persons to transcend themselves through knowledge and love ... and become more than self-enclosed monads."¹⁴ It refers to the deepest dimension of the human person, whether religious or non-religious, and presupposes a life that is not isolationist and self-absorbed, but rather characterized by "self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."¹⁵ Such an approach is anthropological, focussing on the human dimension of spirit. In addition, and important for the present discussion, is the fact that the term spirituality "... is unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience."¹⁶

Spirituality is not necessarily linked to *religion*. There are many who cannot align themselves with traditional religion. In the West, many church structures are evaporating, organised religion is in decline, and there is a clear process of secularisation, and disengagement of society from religion. Some of the reasons for this state of affairs can be seen to be as follows: firstly, a fanatical intolerance among some religious groups who are totally committed to an ideology with the result that purely humanitarian feeling and ethical behaviour are ignored; secondly, autocratic systems of religious governance, which do little to encourage critical thought; thirdly, the use of Scripture as "law" instead of life-giving, sustaining and nourishing; fourthly, the treatment of women in many religious groups as second-class citizens; and fifthly, hierarchical divisions which have contributed to an élitism unacceptable to twenty-first century women and men. As a result, one could speak of a certain "allergy" towards religious and ecclesiastical institutions due to their dogmatic or practical intransigence.¹⁷ Institutional religion can lead to "empty ritualism, hypocrisy, clericalism, corruption, abuse of power, superstition, and many other deformations familiar from the history of religions and from which no religion is totally free."¹⁸ As such, this leads to disillusionment and jettisoning ties with organised religion. In an age of secularism and agnosticism, true spirituality may be the way forward for these contemporary women and men who espouse a

¹⁴S. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?" *Horizons* 13, 2 (1986) 265; "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, 2 (2003) 165.

¹⁵Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality..." 266; "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in A. Holder, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, 16.

¹⁶Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy" *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 678.

¹⁷C. Kourie, "Mysticism: Gift for the Church," *Neotestamentica* 32, 2 (1998) 438.

¹⁸S. Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality..." 171.

“secular spirituality.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, spirituality can be a source of renewal for religion; and religion can prevent spirituality from becoming rudderless and isolated.²⁰

Bearing the foregoing in mind, we turn now to *Christian Spirituality*.²¹

Christian Spirituality

Christian spirituality, in certain circles, has for far too long been identified with asceticism, denial of the “world” and an anti-materialistic philosophy of life. Often an over-emphasis on self-denial has the *opposite* effect, namely an over-concentration of self, which precludes real growth and full maturation. Fortunately, in recent decades a more acceptable understanding of spirituality has arisen which is not dualistic and world-denying. McGinn offers a brief working description: “Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialised forms It is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in Christian consciousness and practice.”²² Schneiders clearly states:

Christian spirituality as Christian specifies the horizon of ultimate value as the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ to whom Scripture normatively witnesses and whose life is communicated to the believer by the Holy Spirit making him or her a child of God.... The contemporary discipline of spirituality ... attends to topics that, in the past, were considered peripheral or irrelevant to the spiritual life. Today we recognize that the subject of Christian spirituality is the human being as a whole: spirit, mind, and body; individual and social; culturally conditioned and ecologically intertwined with all of creation; economically and politically responsible.²³

Contemporary spirituality impacts on the totality of life: it is non-dualistic, encompassing the entire life of faith, without bifurcation

¹⁹P.H. Van Ness, *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*. London: SCM Press, 1996; P. Heelas, & L. Woodward with B. Seel, B. Szerszynski & K. Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005; C. Kourie, “Postmodern spirituality in a secular society,” in C. Du Toit, ed., *Secular Spirituality as a Contextual Critique of Religion*, Pretoria: RITR, 2006. See in this connection, *Implicit Religion: Journal for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality*, available via Equinox Publishing: <http://www.equinoxpub.com> The 30th Denton conference on Implicit Religion, Yorkshire, UK – May 2007, celebrated its 30th year of studying the role and manifestation of religion outside the realm of established religious institutions.

²⁰S. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality...,” 176.

²¹References to ‘spirituality’ in the remainder of this paper will refer to ‘Christian’ spirituality, unless otherwise specified.

²²B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff & J. Leclercq, eds., 1985. *Christian Spirituality. Origins to the Twelfth Century*. London: SCM, 1985, xv-xvi.

²³Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” 17.

between sacred and secular.²⁴ Clearly, the letters of Paul do not posit a dichotomy between the incorporeal, or non-material, and the corporeal, or material. For Paul, the *spiritual* person is one whose life is nourished and directed by the Spirit of God; the *carnal* person is one whose life is diametrically opposed to the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit is the enriching power that heals, invigorates, vitalizes and transforms the follower of Christ. To be a "Spirit-person" is the essence of spirituality. Moltmann speaks of the Holy Spirit as the "source of energy and the divine field of force," a "vitalizing energy," a "flowing, an outpouring and a shining ... the source of life, the origin of the torrent of energy."²⁵

For present purposes, it will be helpful to survey briefly the history of the term "spirituality" and secondly, the history of the *discipline* of spirituality.

History of the Term "Spirituality"

As is well known, the word 'spirituality' comes from the Latin *spiritualitas*, which is related to *spiritus* and *spiritualis* – used to translate *pneuma* and *pneumatikos* in Paul's writings. Paul, in turn relied on the Old Testament role of the spirit (*ruah*) of God. The interpretation of spirituality in the Pauline sense, as described above, continued to hold sway throughout the early centuries of the church, with explicit mention in Psuedo-Jerome in the fifth century in the admonition, "So act as to advance in spirituality."²⁶ However, by the twelfth century, a change occurred in which spirituality was seen in *opposition* to the corporeal or material. Philosophical developments in theology brought about an understanding of the term "spiritual" as that which refers to "the intellectual creature in contrast to non-rational creation."²⁷ Further developments in meaning occur in the thirteenth century, in which the juridical sense of "spirituality" as that pertaining to the clerical estate; those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction were called the *spiritualitas* or "lords spiritual" in contrast to those exercising civil jurisdiction, the *temporalitas*, the "lords temporal."²⁸ Although the earlier religious understanding of spirituality was still present, alongside the more philosophical interpretation, the predominant usage from the thirteenth to the

²⁴C. Kourie, "What is Christian Spirituality?" in C. Kourie & L. Kretzschmar, eds., *Christian Spirituality in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000.

²⁵J. Moltmann, 1997. *The Source of Life*, London: SCM, 1997, 68, 69.

²⁶Epist. 7; PL 30:114D-115A, in W. Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," in M. Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993, 931.

²⁷Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality..." 258; P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*. New York: Crossroad, 1992, 35.

²⁸Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," 931.

sixteenth centuries, was that pertaining to the clerical state. In the seventeenth century, spirituality reappeared in its religious form, however, not without controversy. In France at this time, "spiritualité" in its positive sense referred to the devout life, expressing a personal, meaningful and affective relationship with God.²⁹ In addition, due to the concern caused by the enthusiastic and quietistic movements of the time, the term was used pejoratively and was condemned as being "too refined, rarefied and separated from ordinary Christian life."³⁰ As a result of these negative connotations associated with spirituality, diverse terminologies appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example: "devotion," "perfection" (in John Wesley and the early Methodists), and "piety" (among Evangelicals). In the eighteenth century, the term was hardly used by Roman Catholics, and in the nineteenth century the word 'spirituality' referred mainly to free religious groups not affiliated to the mainline churches.³¹ In the twentieth century, spirituality reappeared, no longer in a negative sense, but as a comprehensive term relating to the fullness of Christian experience. This usage has continued into the twenty-first century, and 'spirituality' is now the term used not only by Christians but by adherents of other religions, by secularists, and even by Marxists.³²

Allied with the foregoing, a brief look at the history of the *discipline* of spirituality will help elucidate its present position in the academy, particularly due to the fact that in many quarters spirituality is still considered a "Cinderella" discipline!

History of the Discipline of Spirituality

With respect to the historical influences on the academic discipline of spirituality, the following observations may be made. Firstly, the early study of theology was a *unitary* endeavour; the various modern divisions in the theological field as we know them today did not exist. Theology comprised "exegetically based interpretation of scripture for the purpose of understanding the faith and living the Christian life"³³ and was essentially an intellectual-spiritual pursuit.³⁴ Waaijman refers to writings as early as the year 200 CE which deal with "practical works, the most important aim of which is the

²⁹Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," 931; Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 35.

³⁰Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 35.

³¹Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 36.

³²Principe, "Spirituality, Christian," 931; P. Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 4.

³³Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality...", 260.

³⁴Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 685.

promotion of the personal life of Christians.”³⁵ The bible was the primary source of all reflection and the scriptural commentary the most common genre, with the result that Christian knowledge was a synthesis of “... biblical exegesis, speculative reasoning and mystical contemplation.”³⁶ Theology was faith seeking understanding, “it was also understanding seeking transformation, the transformation of self and world in God through Christ in the power of the Spirit.”³⁷ Clearly, this referred “... primarily to the global and integrated enterprise of living the spiritual life, meditating on the Bible as scripture, thinking clearly and faithfully within and about the tradition, practicing personal prayer, celebrating liturgically within the believing community, and living the Beatitudes that Jesus preached. The theologian was defined as one who prayed truly.”³⁸ In the thirteenth century, with the rise of city culture in Western Europe, the rise of the university and the emergence of conceptual systems derived from philosophy, theology and spirituality began a process of separation.³⁹ This was exacerbated by the positioning of spirituality in Part II of his *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas. As a result, spirituality, or what came to be known as “spiritual theology” became a subdivision of moral theology, which in turn drew its principles from dogmatic theology. Allied to this apparent “demotion” of spirituality, is the fact that although there were writings by some “mistresses”⁴⁰ of the spiritual life, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), theologians were primarily men, who continued the scholastic tradition of Aquinas. Sheldrake takes this point further, in his claim that there was “... a grafting on to the biblical vision of Christianity of the humanistic values and traditional philosophical attitudes of the contemporary upper-class and male élites.”⁴¹ In the seventeenth century that branch of dogma dealing with the principles of the spiritual life came to be classified as “ascetical theology.” In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the spiritual life became the object of study and teaching, and as the “science of the life of perfection,” it was called “spiritual theology.” It comprised two sub-divisions: “ascetical theology,” as noted above,

³⁵K. Waaijman, “What is Spirituality?” in P.G.R. De Villiers, C. Kourie & C. Lombaard, eds., *The Spirit that Moves. Orientation and Issues in Spirituality. Acta Theologica Supplementum 8* (2006) 1.

³⁶Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 38.

³⁷S. Schneiders, “The Discipline of Christian Spirituality and Catholic Theology,” in B. Lescher & E. Liebert, eds., *Exploring Christian Spirituality. Essays in Honour of Sandra M. Schneiders IHM*, New York: Paulist Press, 2006, 199.

³⁸Schneiders, “The Discipline of Christian Spirituality...,” 199.

³⁹Waaijman, “What is Spirituality?” 1.

⁴⁰Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality...,” 261.

⁴¹Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 40.

and “mystical theology,” the former relating to the life of perfection in its active or pre-mystical stage, and the latter relating to the life of perfection subsequent to the onset of passive mystical experience.⁴² The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed the ‘new’ discipline of spirituality which is in the process of being liberated from “its tutelage to dogmatics” and is broadened “to include the whole of the human search for self-transcendent integration and authenticity.”⁴³ Thus the nomenclature “spirituality” is preferred to the “historically freighted” term “spiritual theology.”⁴⁴

Although this brief historical survey hardly does justice to the subject at hand, nevertheless, it has hopefully helped position spirituality as a discipline in its own right. “Spirituality,” since it does not carry the theological “baggage” associated with the term “spiritual theology,” as discussed above, lends itself to “comparative and cross-traditional inquiry and dialogue.”⁴⁵ This will be taken up further in the discussion of methodology; suffice it for now to welcome the emancipation of spirituality and to accord it its rightful place in the academy of the twenty-first century.

By way of summary, Christian spirituality impacts on the totality of everyday life; it is non-dualistic and holistic, effecting change at cognitive, volitional and affective levels of the person. Spirituality recognises the fullness and complexity of the human being. It has come a long way and speaks to us from the corridors of history: freed from deterministic categories, it allows a fresh approach both in terms of the lived experience itself and also the academic discipline. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to a short analysis of *how* the discipline of spirituality is studied in the academy today.

Methodological Issues in the Study of Spirituality

As noted, earlier, spirituality can denote the actual experience of self-transcendence, whereby life is lived according to the ultimate values and commitments upon which we base our lives; and in addition, it refers to “... the field of study which attempts to investigate in an interdisciplinary way spiritual experience as such, i.e., as spiritual and as experience.”⁴⁶ Such “spiritual experience” refers not only to religious experience in the strict sense of the word, but also “those analogous experiences of ultimate meaning and value” which impact on individuals and groups in a life-giving and authenticating

⁴²Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 686.

⁴³Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 689.

⁴⁴Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 689.

⁴⁵Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 690.

⁴⁶Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 31.

manner.⁴⁷ In order to bring clarity to the investigation of the above, certain methodological principles need to be elucidated.

The seminal work of Schneiders with respect to the study and methodology of spirituality leads to the following preliminary observations: firstly, this endeavour is interdisciplinary; secondly, the investigation is inclusive of “non-religious” experience; thirdly, this academic study is “descriptive-critical rather than prescriptive-normative”; fourthly, it is “ecumenical, cross-cultural and holistic”; fifthly, a “three-dimensional” approach is advocated, viz., a *descriptive* phase, in which historical, textual and comparative studies are undertaken, followed by an *analytical* and *critical* phase, resulting in both *explanation* and *evaluation*, with the help of the theological, human and social sciences. The final phase is *synthetic* and/or *constructive* and leads to *appropriation*, and is governed by hermeneutical theory.⁴⁸

The question of *appropriation*, *self-implication* or *transformation* should be a *sine qua non* in the study of spirituality. Perhaps at the risk of incurring scholarly rebuke, given the “objectivity” of the academic enterprise, I would venture to say that the study of spirituality cannot be a merely disinterested exercise; it impacts upon the researcher, teacher and pupil alike.

Anthropological Method

The *anthropological* method has been succinctly advocated by Schneiders:⁴⁹

Essentially, the anthropological approach takes as its starting point neither the theological tradition that informs or governs Christian spirituality experience nor the historical record of spirituality experience but the spirituality intrinsic to the human subject as such. In other words, it is the anthropological structures and functioning of the person as a subject called to self-transcending integration with an horizon of Ultimacy which raise and shape the questions and suggest the appropriate resources for the

⁴⁷Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 31.

⁴⁸Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality...”; “Spirituality in the Academy”; “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline. Reflections from Experience,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1, 2 (1993) 10-15; “Religion vs. Spirituality...”; “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in E. Dreyer & M. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005; “The Study of Christian Spirituality...”; “Christian Spirituality...”; “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality...”; “The Discipline of Christian Spirituality...”

⁴⁹In a later work Schneiders (“A Hermeneutical Approach...,” 49, originally published in 1994) re-articulates her own approach as “hermeneutical” rather than “anthropological,” due to certain misunderstandings which accrue to the latter term.

study of spirituality. Spirituality does not characterize us primarily as Christians but first of all as humans.⁵⁰

Such an approach is interdisciplinary (the value of which has been noted above) cross-cultural and inter-religious. The researcher is open to a variety of approaches, inter alia, psychological, sociological, feminist, liberationist, ecological, pluralistic, literary, artistic, humanistic, in addition to biblical, religious and theological.⁵¹

Although “internal heterogeneity” and “boundary crossings” reflect the new “internally diverse” situation, nevertheless the institution changes very slowly, and in practice university departments still reflect a strong compartmentalization, in spite of “porous boundaries.”⁵²

Schneiders delineates two “constitutive” disciplines: *scripture* and the *history of Christianity*. These are constitutive “because they supply the positive data of Christian religious experience as well as its norm and hermeneutical context.” These two fields provide the necessary background, context and basic training for studies of Christian spirituality.⁵³ Berling adds, correctly, a third constitutive discipline, namely *comparative religions*.⁵⁴ The latter supply important comparative data and analytical categories that enhance the understanding of Christian spirituality. Thus Christian spirituality builds upon or borrows extensively from the disciplines of biblical studies, history of Christianity and comparative religions. Therefore, “Biblical studies, history of Christianity, and comparative religion all become ‘constitutive disciplines’ in so far as they supply positive data and the hermeneutical contexts for understanding Christian Spirituality.”⁵⁵

A broad range of what Schneiders calls “problematic disciplines” so called because of the problematic of the phenomenon being studied, are included in the academic study of spirituality.⁵⁶ Schneiders invokes the model of “problem-based interdisciplinarity” – which arises from team-based interdisciplinary projects – often in the social

⁵⁰Schneiders, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline...,” 13.

⁵¹M. Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1997, 128; K. Waaijman, “Spirituality...”

⁵²Berling, “Christian Spirituality...,” 37-38.

⁵³Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality...,” 8.

⁵⁴Berling, “Christian Spirituality...,” 40.

⁵⁵Berling, “Christian Spirituality...,” 41. Berling, quoting Klein, refers to “the burden of comprehension” in the act of borrowing. “At the very least, the burden of comprehension requires a ‘basic understanding of how something is used in its original context.’”

⁵⁶Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality...,” 10.

sciences or the health field.⁵⁷ An example of this would be research determining the effect of meditation/prayer on patient recovery, utilizing scientific methods of analysis, bio-feedback, etc.

Of necessity, this more open-ended approach will demand more of the researcher than the more commonly accepted methods, namely the *historical* and the *theological* approaches.

Theological Method

The *theological* method has deep roots in Christianity, and as noted in the historical survey, proponents of this method often use the term "spiritual theology," instead of "spirituality." At the root of this approach is the emphasis on the central doctrines of Christianity, for example, the Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, the sacraments, etc., and their normative role for judging the authenticity of spirituality.⁵⁸ Theological approaches, by their very nature, are less open to inter-disciplinarity, and tend to concentrate on "theories, concepts, principles and obligations"; they run the danger of allowing "theological presuppositions to unduly dictate and restrict spiritual experience or the understanding of spirituality."⁵⁹ No doubt, theology can be a means of clarification and support, and even provide challenges and correction, in addition to the fact that a theological method is more easily followed in seminaries, nevertheless it runs the danger of once again subsuming spirituality instead of recognizing it as an equal partner.⁶⁰ Certain dangers have to be clearly avoided, for example, the notion that spirituality is "theology done right," namely, with the engagement of head and heart; and as a "corrective to a rationalistic and desiccated abstract theology."⁶¹ It is important, in this era of greater clarity concerning the relationship between spirituality and theology to avoid "conceptual slippage"⁶² which prevents true debate.

Theology attempts to interpret the texts and traditions of Christianity in critical dialogue with the culture in which it is lived today, realizing that theological discourse is itself part of culture and therefore not fully separable from it. It seeks what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons between the Christian faith tradition as thematized in theological loci and the cultural situation in which that tradition is

⁵⁷Berling, "Christian Spirituality...", 42.

⁵⁸Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 124.

⁵⁹Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 124.

⁶⁰Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 125.

⁶¹Schneiders, "The Discipline of Christian Spirituality...", 198.

⁶²Schneiders (in "The Discipline of Christian Spirituality...", 197-200) uses this term to describe the problems associated with the lack of precision when the terms "theology" and "spirituality" are not carefully defined according to specific usage.

lived and of which it is a part. The academic discipline of spirituality ... is also a hermeneutical enterprise. It seeks to interpret concrete and individual instances of the living of Christian faith as these are mediated to us in particular texts, practices, art objects, and so on. It seeks a fusion of horizons between the world of the scholar and the individual phenomenon being studied.⁶³

A position of reciprocity and critical correlation between theology and spirituality is the preferred approach.

Historical Method

The *historical* or what has been called *historical-contextual* method⁶⁴ has clear advantages in that it centres spirituality in the historical rootedness of the particular tradition, and its linear and organic development. Examination of the documents or texts which describe a particular spiritual experience, or movement or person, remind us of the continuity which binds us to the past. This helps prevent a sense of isolation in the study of spirituality; the experience of those who have gone before can help "enlighten, instruct, guide, challenge, or validate our own" enabling a greater appreciation of the process of history.⁶⁵ The importance of *tradition* cannot be overlooked:

"... the place of history in the study of spirituality is a reminder of the positive power of religious-spiritual 'tradition.' Without some sense of tradition, an interest in spirituality lacks something vital that can only be gained by a renewed attention to historic Christian spiritualities that have had such an influence, explicitly or covertly, on Western culture."⁶⁶

Notwithstanding its value, however, the historical method also has its limits. "Spirituality ... must cast the net wider [than history] because of the recognition that Christian spiritual experience is not reducible to the history of Christian spirituality as this is expressed in historical texts."⁶⁷ Although an understanding of history is a prerequisite for the scholar, nonetheless, there are "many realities in the sphere of spirituality ... which ... are essentially transhistorical or outside the proper sphere of the discipline of history."⁶⁸ Schneiders continues in this vein in her assertion that:

⁶³Schneiders, "The Discipline of Christian Spirituality...", 207.

⁶⁴B. McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," in E. Dreyer & M. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, 33.

⁶⁵Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 126; Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 1992.

⁶⁶Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 9-10.

⁶⁷Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 127.

⁶⁸Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach...", 55.

One can study the conditions leading up to a conversion experience, the observable conditions of the experience itself, and its publicly available results including first or third person accounts of the experience. But can one study, historically, the conversion experience itself? Or mystical experience as such? Or transformation as religious or spiritual experience? It seems to me that historical study, while indispensable as a participant in the study of the spiritual life, is not the defining method.⁶⁹

Hermeneutical Method

Schneiders posits the *hermeneutical* method as a preferable approach, not in the sense of applying a particular hermeneutical theory, or agenda, but rather as a process of description, critical analysis and constructive interpretation, leading to “appropriation that is transformative of the subject.”⁷⁰ The question of ‘appropriation’ will be taken up below, when dealing with spirituality and transformation; for present purposes, it is worthwhile to refer to Perrin for further clarification:

Hermeneutical theory refers to techniques used to tease out the message and meanings that are not immediately obvious in all sorts of human activity. Hermeneutics, or interpretation, can be applied to texts, human actions, events, or artistic productions – all aspects of human life. Human life does not speak for itself; it needs to be *interpreted*....Hermeneutics gets around the prejudice of where, when, and how God is present in the world by being open to investigating all phenomena within their own parameters of meaning.⁷¹

Schneiders delineates three steps in the hermeneutical process: Firstly, a *description* of the particular phenomenon or phenomena under investigation. This will involve textual witness, historical facts, political, sociological and psychological elements, etc., where relevant. Secondly, *critical analysis* will be undertaken. Such analysis would involve, inter alia, theological criticism, and inter-disciplinary analysis, depending on the object under consideration. Thirdly, *constructive interpretation* is of vital importance as, in Schneiders’ words, “The objective of the study of spirituality is not simply to describe or explain the spiritual experience but to understand it in the fullest sense of that word.”⁷² This involves “not only intellectual deciphering of a phenomenon but appropriation that is transformative of the subject, what Ricoeur calls expansion of the being of the subject.” This does not detract from the *cognitive* factor in

⁶⁹Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach...,” 55.

⁷⁰Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach...,” 57.

⁷¹D. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 41.

⁷²Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach...,” 56-57.

the academic study of spirituality. Intellectual reflection and research are primary; nevertheless they are not divorced from lived reality in the present. Whilst the academic study of spirituality differs from *formative* programmes (the latter often conducted in seminaries, retreat centres or departments of Practical or Pastoral Theology) nevertheless, the importance of “interiority” in academic endeavour is crucial.

The self-implicating nature of spirituality, as already noted, in no way precludes the academic rigour necessary for research in the academic field of spirituality. Such research aims:

To understand, theoretically and practically, the lived experience of God and try to clarify this phenomenon in all its multiplicity and uniqueness and power ... [it is] concerned with the conditions of possibility of such experience, its actual occurrence, the variety of religious experience, the structure and dynamics of such experience, the criteria of adequacy of such experiences, the effect of social context and theological milieu on religious experience in literature, art, and social construction, and so on.⁷³

The only difference between such scholarship and that of other human sciences or even natural science is the fact that scholars of spirituality investigate the “actual human experience of God rather than a purely ‘natural’ phenomenon, such as a social movement, or a chemical reaction.”⁷⁴

Phenomenological method⁷⁵

Waaijman considers a “*dialogical-phenomenological*” approach to be the best scientific method for analyzing spirituality, since, “Phenomenology is ... a method of working ... that is focused on experience and the internal examination of experience” and a dialogical approach is important because it “posits the principle of alterity: that which is other, the other and the Other ...”⁷⁶ Utilising form-descriptive, hermeneutic, systematic and mystagogic tools of research, Waaijman aims at integrating the phenomenological approach with that of dialogical thought and vice-versa.⁷⁷

⁷³Schneiders, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline...,” 12.

⁷⁴Schneiders, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline...,” 12.

⁷⁵Phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) arose as a reaction to the naturalist view in which reality was seen as essentially objective. A result of this positivistic approach was the exclusion of the subjective aspect of reality from in-depth consideration at an ontological level. Phenomenology emerged to obviate the problem of uncritical equation of objectivity with reality.

⁷⁶Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Method*, 535.

⁷⁷Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 599.

By way of summary, methodological postulates are but tools, not the final destination for the scholar of spirituality. Particularly with respect to the subject under investigation, both intellectual interpretation and intuitive understanding are essential. A phenomenological, rather than a confessional approach to the academic study of spirituality effects an open mind, whereby different spiritualities can be analysed and their respective contribution both at a personal and a societal level can be ascertained. Experience of teaching Christian spirituality has shown that students and teachers alike are not just objective observers, but deeply committed to the exciting task of researching and implementing life-changing truths. Tuition and research is itself a life-enhancing activity. Although the academic rigour is exacting, the “energizing” effects of this research flows into one’s life and ministry.

Conclusion

We cannot deny that problems still exist in the academy with respect to the new discipline of spirituality. The study of “experience” still sends shudders through some esteemed professorial bodies! Nevertheless, the academic study of spirituality continues to gain ground, and attracts large numbers of quality students with a wide variety of research interests. Serious and critical engagement with the subject matter of this new discipline continues to grow, and exciting new areas of discourse are opening up to scholarly analysis. Its vocabulary is developing; primary resources and research tools are now more readily available; academic societies are providing a forum for exchange of ideas; and scientific journals in the field are of a high standard. The study of spirituality is increasingly facilitating productive interchange between global spiritual traditions, an interchange which is of benefit to all parties concerned. We are witnessing a renewal of interest in perhaps what is one of the oldest traditions in human history, namely, the transmission of spiritual wisdom. Interest in spirituality is an indication of a deep-felt desire within the hearts of women and men to find unity and wholeness, both individually and in society. Contemporary spirituality is no longer concerned primarily with the inner processes of the human being, but also with the very real needs of present society, including the need to preserve the planet. Christian spirituality is not deracinated from earthly concerns, but fully embraces the phenomenal world. Post-patriarchal and telluric, spirituality is reclaiming its position in society and in the academy, and as such, will contribute to a global transformation of consciousness. The University has a role to play in this endeavour, a role that is increasingly becoming clearer as former attitudes of isolation and suspicion give way to openness and inter-disciplinary exchange.