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Spirituality and the God Question

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS

The tenth anniversary of this excellent journal is not only a good occasion to celebrate its present stature and the tireless, talented leadership of its founder and editor Douglas Burton–Christie but, at least for some of us, to recall with affection and appreciation the initial venture, *Christian Spirituality Bulletin: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality*, which began in 1993 and became *Spiritus, A Journal of Christian Spirituality* in 2000. And it also provides the opportunity to raise a question for the present and the future which is perhaps subtly revealed in the continuity and discontinuity of the respective titles of the two phases of the publication. The continuity is in the words “Christian Spirituality.” But there is a slight shading of difference in that the current journal no longer limits itself to its role as the official organ of the SSCS. The Society itself has increasingly expanded its interaction with all aspects of spirituality and it has broadened its concerns beyond the academy and its participants. The question I want to raise has to do with how this expansion and broadening has affected, might affect, and perhaps should or should not affect the notion of *Christian* spirituality as the focus of the Society and the journal.

Spirituality, after centuries in academic limbo, resurfaced in the mid-twentieth century as the existential concern of many Christians (and other people) and a fascination, at first almost furtive, of a number of people in the academy. Although many factors could be adduced to explain this phenomenon I would suggest that the broken, or at least distorted, connection between immanence and transcendence characteristic of the post-war years was at the root.

Theology in the early to mid- twentieth century, operating in a rarified sphere of scholastic abstraction that was religion’s homage to the Enlightenment, was increasingly alienated from the actual religious experience of probably the majority of believers. However academically respectable it was in its own sphere, scholastic theology as most people encountered it was not rooted in, explanatory of, or conducive to personal engagement with anything beyond the banality of everyday life. It was about a transcendent universe that had little connection to this one, the proverbial choreography of angels on the head of a pin. On the other hand, religion as practiced in mainline institutional de-

nominations was, for many people, a dull, oppressively obligatory, and largely incomprehensible routine. In other words, the roots of transcendence in real experience had atrophied, leaving religious experience itself dessicated. People in search of personal meaning in life, of something that transcended the daily struggle for survival in the workaday world, turned increasingly to systems of personality development, psychotherapy, support groups including cults and communes, mind-altering drugs, various kinds of self-help techniques, back-to-nature romanticism, eastern religions, and western gurus. Bookstore shelves provided an endless supply of guides to transcendence though, given the shallowness of their roots, the shelf life of most of these products was predictably short, seldom surviving the lifetime (or celebrity) of their promoters.

At the same time, scholars of religion, especially in theology and biblical studies, who suspected there was more to their disciplines than seemed academically available or respectable, longed to investigate persons, phenomena, ideas, and experiences that did not fit neatly in any recognized discipline. Interestingly enough, both ordinary seekers and curious scholars were often attracted to the mystics of their own and other religious traditions—people whose intense experience of the “beyond” was deeply rooted in religious-theological traditions concerning the Transcendent. These unusual figures, often immensely influential in their own historical contexts and of perennial interest beyond those contexts, did not just have transcendent experiences but testified to real experiences of the Transcendent. Not surprisingly, the first forays of scholars into the field we now call spirituality were often focused on mystics and mystical texts. What made these remarkable people “tick?” Was what they reported the result of psychological aberrations or were they, perhaps, the sanest people in their respective milieux? What accounted for their enduring credibility and influence? How were they able to communicate so fascinatingly what they universally claimed was “ineffable?” And how could one account for the similarities among mystics across religious traditions despite the undeniable and profound differences in the belief and symbol systems in which their experience was embedded?

The ferment around “spirituality” as it was tentatively called led scholars from various theological disciplines, including systematics, church history, ethics, and biblical studies, to begin exchanging ideas at conventions and in some publishing venues like *CSB*, *Horizons*, or monastic journals. These scholars of religion were soon joined by so-called “transpersonal” and developmental psychologists, comparative religionists, literary scholars, secular historians, and others. In a remarkably short period of time a new academic field of research and discourse, spirituality, emerged in graduate schools, gave rise to major publishing ventures like the Paulist Press Classics of Christian Spirituality series and led to the founding of a professional association, the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, in the 1970s.

At this point in history, and within the lifetime of most of the “founding figures” of this new discipline, certain common points of reference, recognized distinctions, sharable definitions, accepted seminal writings, and even technical vocabulary have emerged which, although still the focus of lively debate, nevertheless allow for increasing mutual comprehension in discussions and cumulation of research results. In other words, the contours of a recognized discipline have emerged.

Some of the points around which there is enough shared understanding for scholars involved in the contemporary field to be able to locate themselves and others in the discussion are the following: 1) spirituality as an academic discipline is the study of spirituality as lived experience; 2) the lived experience in question is personal and/or communal efforts toward life-integration by self-transcendence toward what is perceived as ultimately valuable; 3) the study of spirituality has at least three possible goals which may be overlapping: academic research in the field, deeper understanding of the nature and process of spiritual growth and participation in that process, practical professional preparation for assisting the spiritual growth of others; 4) spirituality as a research discipline claims to be, without contradiction, both methodologically rigorous and self-implicating; 5) various approaches such as historical, theological, and anthropological—any of which may be more descriptive or prescriptive, hermeneutical or normative, depending on audience, context, and purpose—are valid; 6) the academic field of spirituality is intrinsically interdisciplinary involving both theological and non-theological disciplines; 7) the discipline is multi- or cross-cultural and religiously pluralistic with these characteristics active to various extents in different research projects; 8) research projects tend to involve a phenomenological or descriptive moment which delineates project, purpose, and procedures, an analytical-critical moment using criteria from various sources, culminating in carefully qualified interpretation and constructive engagement of some kind with the lived experience called spirituality.

While research projects in this new field and their results were from the beginning extremely diverse, people in the field were beginning to be able to recognize relevant work, build on each other’s advances, criticize new ideas in mutually understandable ways, and tell the valid from the ephemeral. All of this signaled the rapid maturation of the field of spirituality as a scholarly discipline and progressively equipped it not only to participate fruitfully in the academy but to be of service to the broad lay population whose avid interest in spirituality is primarily practical and personal rather than theoretical.

The scholars who founded the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, as I remember it, were more exercised by the question of what the term “spirituality” referred to than what made it Christian. Most, if not all, of the first members were Christians, or teaching in Christian institutions, or teaching specifically Christian subjects, or forming Christian ministers so the designa-

tion covered fairly well what the people involved were actually doing. And we were also aware that the term “spirituality” was potentially so broad, especially because research scholars in the field and non-academic practitioners were both interested in participating in the conversation, that it risked becoming too vague and diffuse unless it was somehow delineated and specified. There were some discussions of what was Christian about the discipline but since most people could do what they were interested in doing within that framework it was less pressing than other questions about the nature of spirituality, method in the field, classical texts and what made them such, and what, if anything, was normative or foundational about them, the relation between theory and practice and between scholarly discourse and field experience, and the like. This quasi-deliberate inattention to the issue of what was Christian about Christian spirituality as a discipline gave rise to at least two developments which are more than a little ambiguous today.

First, the issue of the relationship of spirituality to any religious or quasi-religious tradition has become increasingly obscure. Widespread disaffection in the post-modern cultural context with institutional religion in general and denominational religion in particular has led many people to see a religiously de-contextualized spirituality as a substitute for or alternative to spirituality as the intense living of a faith tradition. For some people this is expressed as a kind of eclecticism in which practices, artifacts, and ritual or literary resources, or less often beliefs or ideologies, of a variety of religions or esoteric traditions are combined into idiosyncratic or private non-or quasi-religious “spiritualities” deriving from and accountable to no coherent intellectual, moral, or social tradition. This de-racination of spiritual attitudes and practices from living traditions has led to an increasing commercialization of spirituality as a consumer commodity. One sees books on, reads advertisements for, “strictly non-religious” (not just non-denominational) courses or workshops on meditation or other exercises guaranteed to bring inner peace and calm, improve relationships, make the practitioner more efficient or effective at home or work, promote restful sleep or weight-loss, or invigorate one’s sex life. The consumers are seeking techniques for strictly immanent, and usually completely individualistic, self-improvement rather than undertaking arduous disciplines of transformation. They are in pursuit of satisfaction and self-affirmation rather than of self-transcendence. Although more refined than hedonistic pursuits of pure pleasure these “spiritualities” of self-cultivation are often difficult to distinguish from the self-absorption or narcissism whose extirpation has always been a primary objective of religious spirituality.

Second, relationships between people in the field of Christian spirituality and scholars from other religious or quasi-religious traditions, especially, Judaism and Buddhism at first, then Hinduism and Taoism, indigenous religions,

new religious movements, and eventually Islam have increased in number and depth - certainly a mutually enriching development. The network has expanded to include scholars and subjects whose foci were not, or not explicitly or primarily, religious: literary and visual artists and their works, critics of music and film, people interested in healing and mind-body interaction, feminists and ecologists and social activists. Others were interested in the relevance of gender to spirituality, in peak experiences or life crises, conversion, or death. Genres of spiritual writing such as poetry, memoir, and nature writing seemed to come under the heading of spirituality. Developmental and life-cycle psychology, cults, holistic healing, the human potential movement and altered states of consciousness, nature mysticism, meditation practice, fasting and other forms of asceticism, monasticism, mysticism, esoterism, experiments in community, and even the demonic attracted the attention of people in the field and people in these other areas were interested in learning about spirituality in relation to their concerns. Wherever human experience found its edges, reached beyond the purely material, touched the sublime or mysterious, or crossed boundaries that were not physical it seemed to have entered the realm of spirituality.

So, what makes Christian spirituality Christian? Or, for that matter, Jewish spirituality Jewish? Or any spirituality religious? Is it the nature of the phenomena studied (mysticism or liturgical ritual or sacred texts, etc.) or the practices undertaken (prayer or asceticism or spiritual guidance), who studies or practices it (believers or saints), the criteria of adequacy of the experience cultivated or under consideration in relation to the religion in question (doctrinal or moral expectations), the tradition out of which the experience arises (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.), the symbol system and linguistic tradition which shapes and mediates the experience and/or the discourse about it?

Recently the discussion has circled back, in a new form, to the question we once asked about whether we were saying anything essential about spirituality in calling it Christian (or Jewish or Buddhist) and I think the question may be critical not only for the field but even more for the human enterprise itself. It is the question of the relation of spirituality to religion. I think most of us are beyond exclusivist or inclusivist elitist claims for the superiority of the spirituality of one religion to that of other religions, but the question of whether spirituality is essentially religious or only accidentally so is quite another matter. Furthermore, I do not mean by "religious" connected to a particular configuration of creed, code, and cult that we call "a" religion such as Christianity or Islam (although there is no such thing as religion in general just as there is no such thing as language in general). The question that concerns me is whether the human quest for the "beyond," for that which "exceeds our grasp," for the "spiritual," even if it responds adequately to the conscious needs and desires of those involved, really exhausts the needs or responds to the deepest desires of

the human spirit. Is there a real difference between the purely immanent, even the immanently sacred or sublime, reach of the human spirit beyond itself and the relationship with the Other who comes to us in self-gift which we cannot command, control, evoke, produce, increase, or even—finally—foster except by gift? Is there a difference between the purely immanent spirituality that emerges from the inner depths and expresses the finite potential of the person and that which is evoked by the self-revelation of that which is not us?

There is no doubt that loving sexuality, friendship, deep meditation, the mystical “feel” of/for the natural world, music or art or poetry, the exercise of total self-sacrifice and heroic courage, some forms of extreme physical exertion, inspiration, imagination, intense intellectual intuition can take us “out of ourselves,” and even into the realm of the sacred or the sublime. They can convince us experientially that there is more to reality than power, pleasure, possession. They can, at least for the moment, unify body and mind in an experience of oneness within ourselves and with the rest of reality that relativizes pain and loss, overcomes existential isolation and alienation, banishes fear and confers ineffable peace, enables us to face both life and death with equanimity. The question is, is such transcendent experience, even the experience of our own self-transcendence, the functional or actual equivalent of experience of the Transcendent?

Today I doubt that anyone with much experience in this field would maintain that there is nothing genuinely “spiritual” outside the sphere of religious faith. Obviously, there is. People can and do live remarkable human lives of personal commitment, faithful relationship, selfless service to humanity, real generosity, stunning courage and sterling integrity without reference to God or interest in religion. I am not especially impressed with the new “atheists” and I am very impressed with Karen Armstrong’s *The Case for God*, but the fact remains that some of humanity’s most stellar exemplars have not come to what one would call religious faith, belief in God however the utterly Other is understood or named. Their spirituality is validated by their lives and the only person who could presume to question that would be someone who could equal the quality of those lives—and such a person probably would not be inclined to do so.

Nevertheless, without getting into questions of relative merit—which are singularly pointless in this sphere—there remains, I would argue, an irreducible difference between spirituality which is a response to revelation, which is an experience of the Transcendent who is not us (however deeply immanent to us), and that which is generated by the human subject and remains the transcendent experience of the exclusively immanent. No matter how transcendently accomplished the secular saint, she or he is finally the source and in control of that achievement. Religious faith and the spirituality it generates

and expresses (at least in the understanding of the religious believer) is Gift received, specifically the self-giving of the Transcendent to which we have no access except by gift and which enters our life only by gift. In this case I am not talking about the subjective quality of the spirituality as lived experience but of a possible ontological difference between oneself and that to which one relates. God has no analogue on the level of immanent human reality, which is what is meant by calling God the “utterly Other.” And some people testify to having actual experience of the living God, of that which is purely and simply unavailable to the human subject in the independent exercise of her or his subjectivity. They claim that their subjectivity is transformed precisely by What/Who they are not and cannot attain but only receive.

Obviously, most people of religious faith are not Hildegard of Bingen or John of the Cross. And many non-religious people, like some nature mystics, are far more spiritually mature than most people who confidently check a denomination on the census form. But my question is whether, if there is a real difference, experientially and ontologically, between transcendent experience of the purely immanent and immanent experience of the absolutely Transcendent, it is the task of religious spirituality to explore with particular care and attention the latter reality. Is the scholar of Christian (or other revealed religious) spirituality particularly responsible to keep this voice at the table? It is perhaps evident that I think the answer to this question is yes. And I would go further. It is not only important for the discipline of spirituality but for spirituality as lived experience that the spirituality of revealed religion not disappear into some undifferentiated category that embraces all transcendent experience, religious or secular, without awareness of or attention to the role of revelation in the former.

This brings me finally to the question of Christian spirituality in particular. The particularity of Christian revelation is constituted by the specificity of revelation focused in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the revelation of the transformation through death of humanity into God. This is the foundation of the sacramental intuition, the reading of all creation which is the unique Christian “take” on the real relation of Transcendence to immanence, the mediation not only of transcendence but of the Transcendent in human being, human experience, human particularity, human history, human destiny. Christian spirituality is the experience of living that reality and the study of Christian spirituality is exploration of that particular experience in relation to all other experience. This understanding of humanity and history will not, and perhaps in God’s plan of salvation is not meant to be, the explicit faith of all individual human beings. But that makes it more, not less, important that those whose gift it is accept responsibility to keep its vision clear and its voice audible in the human discourse, in interaction with all the other valid insights

into reality coming from other types of spirituality, both immanent (sometimes labeled “secular”) and transcendent (or “religious”). There is, it seems to me, nothing in the human experience of quest for transcendence that the scholar of Christian Spirituality cannot legitimately and fruitfully engage; but there is something, perhaps, that such a scholar must not fail to articulate into the corporate exploration of this subject. However shifting the terrain of the discourse, however variegated and novel the contributions, however startling the insights or difficult the challenges or confusing the experiences that work in this field involves, the scholar of Christian spirituality is always, like Augustine, searching the page for the name of Christ, explicit or potential, in the conviction that Jesus Christ is yesterday, today, and the same forever.