

Main Issues in Spirituality

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SUMMARY

The exploding interest in spirituality during the last generation can be seen as a direct result of the critical attitudes towards long-established institutions, ideological and religious systems and traditional models for faith and lifestyle. One of the great challenges to Christian spirituality today is the widespread subjectivity in philosophy and culture. It is not in accordance with a Christian understanding to claim that all truth is fragmentary and cultural conditioned. Christian spirituality is living faith in the triune God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and

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RÉSUMÉ

La dernière génération a manifesté un intérêt décuplé pour la spiritualité. On peut considérer ce phénomène comme la conséquence directe de l'attitude critique adoptée à l'égard des institutions anciennes, des systèmes idéologiques et religieux et des modèles traditionnels pour la foi et le style de vie. L'un des plus grands dangers pour la spiritualité chrétienne aujourd'hui vient de la subjectivité qui imprègne la philosophie et la culture. Il n'est pas conforme à la pensée chrétienne de prétendre que toute vérité est fragmentaire et conditionnée par la culture. La spiritualité chrétienne consiste en

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das während der letzten Generation explodierende Interesse an Spiritualität kann als direktes Ergebnis der kritischen Einstellungen gegenüber lange etablierten Institutionen, ideologischen und religiösen Systemen und traditionellen Modellen für den Glauben und den Lebensstil angesehen werden. Eine der großen Herausforderungen für die heutige christliche Spiritualität ist die in Philosophie und Kultur weit verbreitete Subjektivität. Die Behauptung, alle Wahrheit sei fragmentiert und kulturell bedingt, ist nicht im Einklang mit einer christlichen Auffassung. Christliche Spiritualität ist der lebendige Glaube an den dreieinigen Gott, der sich in Jesus Chris-

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communicates through the Holy Spirit. To be a Christian means: to live in daily conversion, turning away from oneself to Christ through repentance and forgiveness. The life together with Christ also includes responsibility for others, for the social community and for the environment. Like a gushing and powerful river, living spirituality breaks its own riverbed. Although spirituality is a personal commitment and expected to be genuine and real, it may not be broken away from the classical sources of spiritual renewal in Holy Scripture and in the confessing Church through the ages.

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une foi vivante dans le Dieu trine qui s'est incarné en la personne de Jésus-Christ et qui nous offre sa communion par le Saint-Esprit. Être chrétien, c'est vivre quotidiennement la conversion, en se détournant de soi pour se tourner vers Christ dans la repentance en vue du pardon. La vie avec Christ implique aussi des responsabilités envers autrui, envers la communauté sociale et l'environnement. La spiritualité vivante jaillit tel un torrent puissant qui déborde sur ses rives. La spiritualité est un engagement personnel authentique et profond, mais elle ne peut se passer des sources classiques de renouvellement spirituel que constituent l'Écriture sainte et l'Église confessante au fil des siècles.

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tus inkarnierte und durch den Heiligen Geist kommuniziert. Ein Christ zu sein bedeutet: in täglicher Bekehrung zu leben und sich durch Umkehr und Vergebung von sich selbst ab- und Christus zuzuwenden. Das Leben mit Christus beinhaltet auch Verantwortung für andere, für die Gemeinschaft und für die Umwelt. Lebendige Spiritualität schafft sich wie ein überschwänglicher und kraftvoller Strom sein eigenes Flussbett. Obwohl Spiritualität eine persönliche Verpflichtung ist, von der erwartet wird, dass sie authentisch und real ist, sollte sie doch nicht von den klassischen Quellen einer geistlichen Erneuerung abgelöst werden, die in der Heiligen Schrift und in der bekennenden Kirche durch die Jahrhunderte zu finden sind.

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Spirituality – a popular word

Over the last couple of decades, spirituality has undergone an explosive development in Western culture, and it is discussed in many fields of study, such as transpersonal psychology, self-development and leadership training. Many of the phenomena, trends and movements on the religious supermarket today deal with some kind of spirituality. The interest in spirituality is very important in healing and shamanism. There is no doubt that spirituality is embedded in our culture today and seems to attract people eager to transcend themselves. But what does it mean? Sandra M. Schneiders has formulated the following definition:

Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.¹

This is a broad definition, which embraces spirituality as a universal phenomenon, common to all mankind. It includes both religious and secular spiritualities, and therefore also Christian and non-Christian spiritualities.

Why are so many people today in different areas of our society swarming around spirituality? Is it a reaction against something? Can it be seen as a sign of protest against modernity? If so, spirituality is to be interpreted in the light of postmodernity, which is critical to the dominance of progressive rationality in our culture since the Enlightenment. People today are asking nervous questions about the high expectations of the technological development and are also sceptical about the optimism of progress which was attractive at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. The two World Wars dealt deep blows to confidence in the progress of humankind. In many ways Auschwitz symbolizes the breakdown of modernity. The same could be said about the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In postmodernity we recognise not only a certain amount of scepticism about science, but above all mistrust regarding received truths.

My thesis is that the exploding interest in spirituality is a direct result of the critical attitudes towards long-established institutions, ideological and religious systems and traditional models for faith and lifestyle. Traditional structures of meaning have been brought down. In western culture today it is often said that all truths are fragmentary and cultural conditioned. That is in accordance with Philip Sheldrake's definition of post modernity:

Postmodernism recognises that all interpretations of "truth" are culturally-conditioned, contingent and morally flawed as intellectually partial.²

If we see spirituality as an impulse to personal renewal, it corresponds to the strong individualistic tendency in interpreting human life in our time. In religious practice we can observe a shift of emphasis from the public space to the private sphere, although there also are some tendencies pointing in the opposite direction. However, it is scarcely possible for churches any longer to maintain a uniform faith and lifestyle for their members and to discipline any who have diverging opinions, because culture has changed and is continually changing. The great diversity in the use and understanding of spirituality can be seen as a sign of the central position of subjectivity in a pluralistic society. Many people today long for spiritual help, but without any clear and fixed idea of what they are longing for. We can recognise a spiritual longing for a god, for love, for a better and more peaceful life. From a missionary Christian perspective it seems appropriate to ask how this spiritual longing can be turned into a real longing for the triune God.

Christian spirituality – a gift of the Holy Spirit

First of all we need to underline that Christian spirituality is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the effect of the work of *Spiritus Sanctus* in our hearts. At Pentecost the apostle Peter said to the thousands of people who were touched by his preaching: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Participation in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is inextricably linked to the reception of the Spirit.³ It is the Spirit who nurtures the life of faith and the life-long growth into Christ. To a certain extent an honest Christian can perceive and experience a living Christian faith in his and her life. This is an essential point in the reflections about spirituality by Manfred Seitz, a German theologian. He defines Christian spirituality in three points:

1. Spirituality is faith which is created by the Holy Spirit and can be experienced.
2. Spirituality includes faith, piety and lifestyle.
3. Spirituality is recognisable faith which takes

place in individuals and in community under changing conditions of life.⁴

At the core of this definition is the belief that Christian spirituality is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers. Spirituality is not only an activity in the life of individuals, but also a power in the fellowship in families, in congregations and in society. The life of faith expresses itself in a way which can be experienced. It is possible to observe the spiritual vitality of living faith. That is the outside of the faith. The inside, however, is hidden from our eyes and can neither be analyzed nor evaluated.

When Sandra M. Schneiders applies her definition of spirituality to the Christian faith, she emphasizes that “the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated through his Holy Spirit”. In Christian understanding the project of self-transcendence is “the living of the paschal mystery within the context of the church community”. Christian spirituality involves personal faith in Christ and a life together with him and in responsibility for others and for the realities of the surroundings.⁵

From these two definitions we can deduce three main points in our understanding of Christian spirituality:

1. Spirituality is based upon belief in the triune God and created by the Holy Spirit.
2. Spirituality embraces the faith and life of individuals and fellowships.
3. Spirituality is lived experience of the Christian faith and can be observed.

These three points are placed at the basis of my analysis of some of the main issues in Christian spirituality today.

Different types of spirituality

Since there are numerous forms of lived experience of Christian faith, spirituality in practice is varied. It is impossible to articulate or define in general terms the most common ways of living out the faith. Like a gushing and powerful river, living spirituality breaks its own riverbed. The variety of expressions depends upon the different church traditions, different spiritual cultures and different Christian personalities. Does that mean that we cannot single out some of the most typical forms of Christian spirituality? The answer is yes and no. We cannot identify all the forms of spirituality in the world but in our part of Christianity we can

at least observe a few widespread visible types. In public discussions, in church life and in encounters with people I have found that there are basically five mainstreams within Christian spirituality:

1. verbal rational witnesses of a living faith
2. worship service spirituality (by participating in listening, confessing, singing and sacramental events)
3. charismatic expressions of spiritual experiences
4. contemplative spirituality
5. aesthetic ritual commitment to God⁶

To this list of types of spirituality one could add many other ways of practising Christian faith. It is possible to describe types of spirituality formed according to prominent theological positions, ideological and political interpretation of Christian faith and specific new religious movements. But does it make sense to differentiate any more? The purpose of pointing out some of the main forms of spirituality is twofold. First, we need to be aware of the variety of spirituality in our historical and contemporary research. Second, it is important to see that the Christian life can be practised in different ways. It would not be wise to try to standardize every lived experience of Christian faith. There is more than one genuine Christian lifestyle in church and society today.

The boundaries between the five mainstreams of spirituality are fluid and therefore it is possible to combine different kinds of spirituality. We can also observe how spiritual devotion can change from one stage of life to another. Elderly people do not always live out their Christian faith with the same enthusiasm as youngsters do, especially after having experienced a personal conversion or a spiritual renewal. We need to be aware of the many forms of spirituality and we should avoid cultivating one while rejecting the others. We should also take into account that the centre of gravity in Christianity has shifted from the northern hemisphere to the southern, where many independent and indigenous churches are growing rapidly.⁷

Today individuals are seeking new forms of spirituality. Many of them participate in silent retreats and meditation groups. Among pastors and lay people in the church there is a new appreciation of classical spiritual texts, like Ignatius' well-known *Spiritual Exercises*.⁸ There is also a growing interest in pilgrimages. An increasing number of pilgrims walk the ancient routes to holy places such as Santiago de Compostella in Spain and the Nidaros

Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway, while ecumenical communities like Taizé and Iona have experienced a renaissance of interest, especially among young adults.⁹ But does that mean that all traditional types of spirituality have lost their strength and influence? In church life in Europe there are still many examples of lived Christian spirituality which are expressed through verbal witness and participation in ordinary worship services.

Commitment and prayer

In difficult times, people often seek comfort by turning to God. Jesus pays special attention to those in need and says: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The Apostle Peter experienced the truth of this promissory invitation, and his appeal to pray is weighty: “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you” (1 Peter 5:7). There are people who know so little about God that they simply seek “an unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Others who suffer the same ailment turn around and pray to a God whom they knew previously. No doubt, prayer can be of help in finding peace and satisfaction in daily life, but this does not mean that prayer is an ordinary therapeutic device. Prayer is not a matter of mental health, although it can also produce mentally hygienic effects.¹⁰

What is Christian prayer? What does God desire through prayer? The point of departure for our understanding of prayer lies in our relationship to God. He wants to be our God. He wants fellowship with us. God is not God for himself and not only God for the impersonal part of creation. When God created man and woman in his image (Genesis 1:27), he established a vital connection with them which continued through the following generations. This is the same divine will for contact with us that is expressed in the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). The commandment presumes that human beings have the potential to live in a religious-ethical relation to God. In prayer we are invited to acknowledge him as Father. We respond to his love by praying to him. Prayer is our answer, our reaction to his action. It is the human “Yes” to his outstretched hand. God has given us prayer in order that we may abandon ourselves to him, surrender ourselves to him, acknowledge him as Lord and call on him in the hour of our need (cf. Psalm 50:15). Through prayer, and for that matter through confession and praise, we establish fel-

lowship with God. When we pray and express our thanks to God, we approach “the corner points of our doing” (*die Eckpunkte des eigenen Tuns*)¹¹ and find ourselves at the edges of our own power. Prayer means exceeding human frontiers. Those who pray will be able to act even in moments of extreme powerlessness. Therefore spirituality is an attitude of hope.

When we pray, the Holy Spirit is active and reassures us that we are children of God (Romans 8:15). The Spirit also intercedes for us just as the Son does. In Romans 8 both the Son and the Spirit are described as our intercessors (Romans 8:26-34, compare Hebrews 7:25). Still, there is something special about the Spirit’s intercessory work because he helps us “in our weakness”. Paul explains it as follows:

for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

There is comfort and encouragement in these lovely words. They offer new hope to those of us who know ourselves to be weak and who struggle to express ourselves to God. The Spirit himself takes the initiative and presents our case before the Father. We are not alone when we struggle with prayer. The promise of Jesus to his disciples that they would always have an advocate with them has been fulfilled (John 14:16, 26). Since the apostolic period the Spirit has purified, strengthened and supplemented the prayers of the faithful. He works not merely in us but for us.

Spiritual sources

When describing the Word of God as the main source to spiritual life, Jesus uses a metaphor. He talks about “living water” (John 4:10). That is the water Jesus gives us. Whoever drinks that water will never thirst. The water which Jesus gives each of us, will become in us “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (v.14). This spring of water within us is a sign of having received the Gospel in faith. Faith comes from what is heard by the preaching of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 10:17). It is the work of the Holy Spirit, who points to Christ and glorifies him to us.

In order to drink the “holy water” we are invited

to listen to the preaching of the Gospel and to study the Holy Scriptures. There are three ways of studying the Scripture: First, historical reading of the texts. We need to use adequate methods to comprehend the history of salvation in its context. Spirituality does not excuse us from hard and thorough scholarly work. Second, we can read the Scriptures from the perspective of the theological challenges of our time. That is what we mostly do in systematic theology. Faced with problems in conversation with people in need, in debates in the church and in struggling for life and justice in society, we are used to asking for biblical guidance. Third, there is a meditative reading of the Scriptures which is of great importance for my spiritual life as a Christian. I listen to what God says through these unique and inspired texts. As the Word of God they show me the way in daily life. My attitude is much like that of the hymnist in the Old Testament: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105).

It is not my intention to create a conflict between historical investigation, theological interpretation and spiritual commitment. Rather, I suggest that one might combine these three ways of reading the Bible, for they belong together and elucidate one another. But I must admit that in certain situations tensions between them may emerge, especially in the relation between the historical meaning of a text and the theological and spiritual understanding of the same text in our time. Because all theology is influenced by its context, we need to be aware of the gap between the culture which contributed to the shape of the old texts and our own cultural settings. Therefore we are obliged to focus earnestly on the hermeneutical question.

In addition to the preaching of the Gospel and the study of the Bible there are spiritual traditions and writings from the history of the Church which can still be influential and inspiring today. Therefore, we should not underestimate the significance of classical edifying texts, of which there are many. The challenge is to choose the good ones and to interpret them in for time.

I would like to draw attention to Martin Luther's *Magnificat* from 1520-1521.¹² In his introduction to the interpretation of this special hymn of praise, Luther reminds us that the most blessed Virgin Mary is speaking out of her own experience, in which she was enlightened and instructed by the Holy Spirit. Luther says:

When the Holy Virgin, then, experienced what

great things God wrought in her, notwithstanding she was so poor, meek, despised, and of low degree, the Holy Spirit taught her this precious knowledge and wisdom, that God is a Lord whose work consists but in this – to exalt them of low degree, to put down the mighty from their seats, in short, to break whatever is whole and make whole whatever is broken.

The main point in Luther's meditation is that God from the beginning, now and until the end of the world creates out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dead. God's eyes look to the depths, not to the heights. Luther refers to 1 Peter 5:5, which is a quotation from Proverbs 3:34: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." In this perspective the reformer sees Mary, the tender mother of Christ. She was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers in her home town of Nazareth, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter whom no-one looked up to nor esteemed. To her neighbours she was but a simple girl, tending the cattle and doing house-work. God selected just her to be the mother of Christ despite of her low estate and nothingness. What was conceived in her, was of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 1:20).

One of the most striking aspects of Luther's great introduction to the *Magnificat* is the extent to which he was influenced by Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1:28-29). It is a mystery which we may never fully understand, that God revealed himself for our salvation in the crucified Christ. And Paul reasserts this belief when he says: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (2:2).

Personal experience always plays a certain role in the life of faith and in theological thinking. What we have seen and heard since childhood has an impact upon our spiritual attitude and reflections. Both individual and collective experiences can be of great importance for the ability to appreciate the Christian faith. A living faith can be an important resource in our approach to the mystery of God. But personal experiences of faith and spiritual experiences do not provide any information about God additional to the revealed Word, nor does prayer. They do not open up any entirely new knowledge of God accessible only to those whose have had special religious experiences, for instance a radical conversion, a miracle of healing or an answer to

prayer. We cannot build our theology and spirituality on our own experiences of the life with God. But it is quite otherwise if religious experience can vivify the God of the Bible for us and put the human person in a right relation to him. Whoever struggles with God in their spiritual life and knows his promises and blessings is near to him in a way that a person without such an existential relation to him is not.

Crossing confessional borders

It is not unusual to classify spirituality on the basis of the characteristics of the different confessional families. In such an approach we organise our understanding of the spiritual life according to the main traditions in the theology of the Orthodox, Roman-Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal and other churches. Within each of these traditions there have been different types of spirituality in church life through the ages. Spirituality has changed in accordance with the shift of influential theological schools, strong awakenings and cultural settings. At the same time some religious streams are crossing the confessional borders, like the Evangelical Alliance, the ecumenical movement and the enthusiasm among Christian youth.

The question is whether we shall continue this classification of types of spirituality. To what extent can the new interest in Christian spirituality open doors between churches and church traditions? Are the widespread secularization in western culture and the growth of young churches in Africa and Asia a call to convergence and cooperation in a new way in order to reach more people with the Gospel? How can mission and evangelism be inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit to meet across confessional borders?

My intention is not to disregard the differences between the historic denominations and the deep-seated theological schools and trends. From an evangelical point of view there are wide gaps between some interpretations of Christian faith which cannot be ignored. These gaps are sometimes so deep and frustrating that it seems difficult to work together in proclaiming the Gospel and serving the Lord in daily life. In some situations it seems better to work separately than to try to ignore theological differences which tax each other's Christian energy. The main point is to be witnesses of the Gospel, without being bound by ideologically and culturally influenced theology

which does not see the necessity of living Christian spirituality.

That does not mean, however, that I refuse to see the potential of bearing witness to Christ across the differences of confessions and theological and pious traditions. For the credibility of the Gospel, especially among young people, it may be of great importance to proclaim Christ together with brothers and sisters from other Christian families and groups. After many years in ecumenical work I would say that the only common way to overcome the differences is reading the Bible together. The Bible – not the tradition – is the source and standard for Christian spirituality.

The ecumenical vision is not primarily an organisation, but a pilgrimage to Christ with different starting points in the church. Christians are on the way towards mutual recognition and confession of their unity in the Holy Spirit. According to the apostle Paul the goal is:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6).

In this perspective it is a biblical obligation for all Christians to promote church unity in faith and truth. Through baptism we are brought into union not only with Christ but also with each other and with the Church of all times and places. Our common baptism, in which the Holy Spirit is at work, is the basis of unity and unites us to Christ in faith. The Faith and Order paper number 111 from 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (also called the *Lima-Document*), says: "We are one people and called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and in all the world."¹³ In order to realize this goal we go different ways – by activating our eyes, hands, feet, voices, feelings and intellect. I would like to stress the significance of praying and the singing of hymns from different church traditions and of coming together for theological reflection. For the unity of the Church it is decisive that spirituality and theology go hand in hand. Confessing the one faith together presupposes a conscious and constructive combination of spiritual practice and theological thinking. We need both at the same time.

Spirituality and theology

In the theological studies at many universities

emphasis is often placed on distinguishing between religious practice and theological reflection. The purpose of this is to see the difference between worshipping God in faith and acknowledging God as academic activity. Worshipping God is often called a first order activity (*theologia prima*), acknowledging God is a second order activity (*theologia secunda*). Living Christian faith is nourished by listening to the Word of God and receiving his sacraments. This faith exposes itself in prayer to God and in service for others. On the other hand, when we study theology we reflect on the origin, the character, the content and the consequences of faith. Theology is not the same as prayer because its purpose – to analyze the nature and the impact of prayer – is different from prayer itself. Faith lives in a church setting, theology in an academic sphere. Faith is a primary, theology a secondary activity.

But is the distinction between worship and theology so plain and obvious? Do these two activities take place in different rooms? Is there no connection between them? At the end of his long service at the University of Basel, Karl Barth said: “The first and basic act of theological work is prayer.”¹⁴ Barth argued that prayer is especially significant for four aspects of theology. First, theological work takes place in a place that not only has open windows towards the life of church and society, but above all is dependent on having a skylight. This is a realm “open toward the object of theology, its source and goal.”¹⁵ The theologian who prays sets his or her own activity to one side and comes before God to seek new clarity about what it means when we say that God is he who governs.

Second, the theological task is to make known God’s words to humankind. The “Word is God’s address to men”, says Barth. We can only truly speak about God when we respond to his speech to us. We do this by speaking to him, therefore, in the second person. Profoundly theological work takes place as “a liturgical act”, that is, as an invocation of God and as prayer to God.¹⁶

Third, theology has the character of an offering to God. One must be willing to offer up one’s theological methods and at any time place them in a crucible to be tested. To make progress in theology is “to begin anew at the beginning.”¹⁷ Through prayer one will again and again be able to make this voluntary sacrifice.

Fourth, it is a part of theological work to pray that God himself may open our blind eyes and stopped ears to his word and his actions. This is a part of the prayer *veni, creator spiritus* (“Creator

Spirit by whose aid”). Entering in, the Holy Spirit “achieves the opening of God for man and the opening for man for God”.¹⁸

In sum, we can say that Karl Barth makes prayer into an attitude that is basic to theological effort. Prayer is not a specific method on a par with other methods, but an aid to the basic disposition toward what theology is and how a theologian is to work. This attitude does not excuse us from scholarly study of the biblical texts and the events of salvation history, but it shows us how we are to bear ourselves before God in order to hear his voice unto salvation and new life. Thus prayer is a model of the theologian’s approach to God who is the source of faith. Praying to God in our theological work is a desire to enter into a relation with the biblical texts which allow us insight into who God is and how he has made himself known. Prayer is a reflection of God’s great overture, his revelation in Jesus Christ. It is therefore important that prayer become the recurring melody of theology.

Theological discernment – crossroads in spirituality

Nowadays we often say that all theology is contextual. Our theological reflections are influenced by the contexts in which we live. There are personal and cultural, ecclesiastical and social elements in our way of theological thinking. Nobody can explore theology in a vacuum. The same can be said about spirituality. We try to understand spirituality and to practice spiritual life in the context of our time. Situations are shifting and can be very challenging.

In our society there is a noticeable market for different spirits. There are big fairs for alternative religions and spiritual masses which introduce a variety of spiritual experience and healing. As Christians we ask how to discern all these spirits. Are there theological criteria which can help us in separating the work of the Holy Spirit from all other spirits? The Apostle John warns young Christians against the many spirits and says to them:

Don’t believe every spirit! Test the spirits to see whether they are of God! There is one criterion by which you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. (1 John 4:2-3).

Face to face with spirits of today we have to find

out whether they are anchored in the incarnation. If a spirit does not confess the incarnate Jesus Christ, we should be suspicious and draw the conclusion that it is a spirit of error. The spirit of truth (v.6) is based upon the love of God which was made manifest among us, “that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (v.9).

In the spiritual landscape of today we are sometimes challenged by an army of mixed spirits consisting of spirits of truth and spirits of error. Conflicting spirits can march hand in hand. In such cases it is necessary to distinguish between right and wrong. Yet this is not a new situation. The Apostle Paul was obviously aware of the problem when he talked about spiritual gifts. Among the gifts he mentioned was “the ability to distinguish between spirits” (1 Corinthians 12:10). This gift is granted by the Holy Spirit, “who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (v.11).

Conclusions

We have defined Christian spirituality as living faith in the triune God, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and communicates through the Holy Spirit. Christians are baptized into the Kingdom of God and incorporated in the Church through the forgiveness of sin and by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Christian spirituality embraces conviction, commitment and lifestyle and is nurtured by the Word of God and the holy sacraments in the community of the Church. The spiritual life is also shaped by the inspiration of classic devotional texts from the history of the Church and through conversations with brothers and sisters in Christ. Christian spirituality is recognisable faith and can be observed and analysed.

The history of spirituality is enormously varied. Since the 1970s and 1980s there has been a new interest in spirituality outside the church and the Christian community. Christian spirituality today is only one of the thousands of spiritual movements. As the world becomes smaller and more closely connected through new technologies and telecommunication, Christian spirituality is growing ecumenically and worldwide. That does not mean that all denominational differences are overcome. Spirituality is still contextual and partly shaped by local traditions. But there is undoubtedly a new opening for spiritual fellowship across the traditional church boundaries.

In this article I have not given any broad survey

of contemporary spirituality. I have only touched on some major issues. They are seen as elements within a theological programme, a programme that is not limited to a discipline within practical theology. Christian spirituality is not only seen as a study of Christian experience within church history or historical theology, but as an attitude to different kinds of theology. I am not drawing a line between academic theology and lived theology, but I am arguing for an interaction between them. The main reason for that is the ultimate value of theology, the mystery of God. We cannot face God only by rational arguments; but we grasp him at least through doxology.

I would conclude this article by pointing out four main issues in the understanding of spirituality today. First, to be a Christian means to live in daily conversion turning away from oneself to Christ through repentance and forgiveness. The challenge is to let our way of life “be worthy of the Gospel of Christ” by standing firm in the Holy Spirit (Philippians 1:27). Followers of Christ carry his cross in the world and are not frightening the opponents of the Gospel. Nobody can live such a life without being renewed by the Holy Spirit. The spiritual strengthening takes place in the Christian fellowship by Word and sacraments, by spiritual conversations and by studying classical devotional texts, which are sources of wisdom.

Second, spirituality needs to be integrated into theological thinking. As far as theology is about the triune God, it is necessary to reflect on the Almighty Father, Jesus Christ the Saviour and Redeemer and the Holy Spirit the Giver of life. Christian faith cannot be understood without taking into account the work of the Holy Spirit. In this perspective it does not make sense to isolate spirituality as a specific theological discipline. It has aspects related to all parts of the theological reflection.

Third, one of the difficulties in the discussion about spirituality today is the widespread subjectivity in culture and philosophy. In this wave of thinking, which also influences the study of theology, there is a tendency to put emphasis on the individualistic approach to truth. Many people in our time, especially younger generations, are critical towards authorities and systems which represent truths from earlier generations. The important task is to root our contemporary theology in the Holy Scripture and to make use of the history of Christian spirituality. Although spirituality is a personal commitment and expected to be genuine and real, it may not be broken away from the classi-

cal sources of spiritual renewal in the confessing Church through the ages.

Fourth, in the mixture of different cultures today and in the numerous religious movements in our part of the world it is an important task to try to discern spirits. What is true Christian spirituality in our pluralistic situation in which the religious market is filled with all sorts of competing spirits? How can I be sure that I have experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in my life? Am I on the right track? Theology and Church need to develop the apostolic gift of grace to distinguish between spirits and to help us to experience the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the Christian community and in our personal life.

Further reading

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Notes

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2 Philip Sheldrake, "Spirituality and theology", in *Halvårsskrift for praktisk teologi* 20 (2/2003) 28.

3 Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 6.

4 Manfred Seitz, 'Evangelisk spiritualitet. Å leve ut sin tro', in *Halvårsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 15 (1998.1) 5; see also Manfred Seitz, *Erneuerung der Gemeinde. Gemeindeaufbau und Spiritualität* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

5 Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality", 1.

6 Cf. Harald Olsen, "Fra lærepreken til lysglobe. Ny spiritualitet i statskirkelige menigheter på Sørlandet", in Repstad, Pål and Henriksen, Jan-Olav (eds.), *Mykere kristendom? Sørlandsreligion i endring* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2005) 121-134.

7 Valerie Lesniak, "Contemporary Spirituality", in Sheldrake (ed.), *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 7.

8 George E. Ganss (ed.), *The Spiritual exercises and selected works of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

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10 Torleiv Austad, *Der Atem des Glaubens: Wie wir heute beten können* (Giessen: Brunnen, 1994) 7-8.

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13 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 3.

14 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, translated by Grover Foley (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1963) 160.

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16 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 164.

17 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 165.

18 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 169.

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