

Constructing Spirituality

The “Politics” of Definitions and Historical Interpretations

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Abstract

How we define “spirituality” and also distinguish and describe different traditions of spirituality is not a simple matter of objective observation. All definitions and descriptions are a matter of interpretation which, in turn, involves preferences, assumptions and choices. In that sense, our approaches to spirituality may often be effectively “political” in that they express values and commitments. Sometimes our historical narratives also reflect the interests of dominant groups – whether in a religious institutional, theological or socio-cultural sense. This process may sometimes be conscious but is more often unconscious and uncritical. This essay first of all explores some of the issues surrounding the question of definition in the study and presentation of Christian spirituality in particular. Second, the essay examines how the history of Christian spirituality has been shaped by certain underlying “narratives”. However, following the thought of Paul Ricoeur, narrative and story are not to be rejected in favour of a quest for history as a form of pure factual “truth”. Rather, what is needed is a more conscious understanding of the power of narrative, its importance and the potential released by identifying forgotten or repressed human stories. Third, the essay then asks whether our approaches to, and descriptions of, particular spiritual traditions have masked prior assumptions about their autonomy, purity and their radical discontinuity (or “rupture”) from what went before or what lies alongside them. Two examples are briefly outlined: the supposed Catholic-Protestant spiritual divide and the often unacknowledged impact of another faith (for example, Sufi Islam) on certain Christian spiritual or mystical traditions. Fourth, the regular geographical-cultural biases in the study of Christian spirituality are noted and one response to this among Spanish-speaking Christians of the Americas, known as “traditioning”, is outlined. Finally, the importance of critical self-awareness in how we employ interpretative frameworks is underlined.

Keywords

Christian spirituality – history – definitions of spirituality – “politics” of interpretations

1 Introduction

Definitions of spirituality and the ways we delineate classic traditions are “constructions” rather than scientifically objective observations. In other words, definitions are acts of interpretation that imply choices and commitments. These choices are “political” in the sense that they embody values and prior assumptions and can sometimes express the interests of dominant groups. Such interests promote certain world-views and ways of constructing historical narratives. Our current European context is one in which the word “spirituality” has moved beyond its original Christian foundations and is applied to other religions as well as to post-religious settings. Equally, within a Christian context, cultures outside Europe are demanding their rightful place as interpreters and transmitters of spiritual traditions rather than as purely passive recipients of ideas and practices imposed from elsewhere. Consequently, the “politics” of definition in relation to “spirituality” is yet more complicated.

To begin with, I want to explore briefly some general questions about how we define “spirituality”. Because I do not believe that there is a single generic “something” called spirituality-as-such that exists on a plane above and beyond history, culture, and context, I then want to focus on one specific, historic religious tradition – namely, Christian spirituality. My intention is to address three critical questions to the tradition. These relate in different ways to the theme of breaches (or discontinuities) and bridges (or connections). First, how do we approach *history*? Second, what are our geographical and cultural boundaries? Traditional studies of spirituality reveal a *geographical* as well as historical bias. Third, and finally, *what realities do we choose as significant* in our analyses of spirituality?

2 Defining Spirituality

“Spirituality” is a concept that defines our era. This is true well beyond the confines of Christianity where the word originates and, indeed, beyond the boundaries of organized religion. One result of the increasing use of the word is that it has dispersed into a wide range of cultural forms. A supposedly subjective turn in Western culture has created a diverse and individual approach to

spiritual experience and practices. “Spirituality” as currently conceived is now native to everyone – personalized, democratized, and eclectic, drawing from different faiths as well as from popular psychology. Some commentators such as the British academic Jeremy Carrette even critique contemporary “spirituality” as no more than another consumer product.¹

“Spirituality” is regularly distinguished from, and contrasted with, “religion”. People who no longer identify with institutional religion or theistic belief wish to describe themselves as “spiritual” and express this in the values they espouse and the practices they undertake to frame their pursuit of a meaningful life. Indeed, the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville has written a fascinating little book on atheist spirituality.² However, this distinction frequently depends on a reductionist view of religion. For example, a recent American commentator on the contemporary spirituality phenomenon notes that, in the popular mind, “religion” is associated with dogma, moralism, authoritarian hierarchies, the constraints of social expectations, and a predominant concern with buildings and money.³ Another work on psychology, religion, and spirituality defines religion in summary terms as a belief in the transcendent, observance of rituals, adherence to ethical conduct based on doctrines, and a tendency to proselytize.⁴ Whether we find it meaningful or not, this contrast between spirituality and religion is reinforced by statistics among the un-churched. One major British survey covering the period from 1987 to 2000 showed that the proportion of people who did not go to a place of worship yet believed in an authentic spiritual reality increased from 29% to 55%.⁵ Such statistics have led some social scientists to suggest that spirituality is replacing religion in a kind of Darwinian evolutionary development because it is a better fit with contemporary needs.⁶ The problem with this developmental interpretation is that it seems to depend on a questionable Enlightenment belief in

1 Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

2 André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* (London: Viking, 2008).

3 See Phyllis Tickle, *Rediscovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

4 David Fontana, *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 6–11.

5 Statistics from David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church: Report on the Findings of the Adult Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2000).

6 See the sociological study based on surveying a specific area of England in Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

human existence as an inevitable crescendo of progress. If the study of history teaches us anything, it is that making such assumptions about a complete rupture with the past, in this case a religious past, is a risky move. Even the ways we perceive the present moment are ambiguous. While, in terms of Western societies, it may be true that increasing numbers of people in non-traditional settings explore a diversity of spiritual theories, experiences, and practices, it is also true that other often young and intelligent people are converting to very conservative forms of religion as their answer to the problem of ultimate meaning in what they feel to be a confusing and dangerous world. If we move beyond Western cultures, assessments of the definitive death of conventional religion are even more in question.

If we turn to people who continue to identify with a religious faith such as Christianity, we see that they too increasingly adopt a mixture of spiritual genres and borrow from across the boundaries of religious faiths. For example, the Dutch social anthropologist Peter Versteeg has analyzed the current work of Christian (predominantly Catholic) spirituality centres in The Netherlands. These have created an interesting place for themselves on the religious-spiritual landscape, positioned somewhere between the institutional Church and the world of alternative spiritualities. For example, the qualifying adjective “Christian” may only refer to the fact that such centres have a Christian origin. However, what is on offer is frequently identified simply as “spirituality” without any clear reference to Christian beliefs.⁷ A similar trend may be detected in the programmes of many retreat and spirituality centres in the United Kingdom and Ireland.⁸

This contemporary spiritual eclecticism among even church-goers raises complex questions about how we understand the way religious traditions function in fluid contexts. The French social scientist and expert on Islam, Olivier Roy, borrows the word *formatage* or “formatting” from computer language in his analysis of the process whereby religions and their spiritual traditions are “reformatted” to fit the norms of the different cultures within which they exist.⁹ This “reformatting” may sometimes be “from above” when religious authorities

7 Peter Versteeg, “Spirituality on the Margins of the Church: Christian Spiritual Centres in The Netherlands,” in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 101–114.

8 For the comprehensive listing of Christian retreat houses and their programmes, see the annual journal *Retreats* published by The Retreat Association, the ecumenical retreat network in the United Kingdom. See www.retreats.org.uk.

9 See, for example, Oliver Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

consciously adapt to new cultural-social contexts. However, “reformatting” is more frequently “from below”. Here, in less theoretical ways, and sometimes in contrast to the attitudes of authority figures, classic themes are reformulated, spiritual practices are adapted or new ways of life are adopted to re-express a tradition. Something crucial remains identifiably “Christian” or “Muslim”, “Catholic” or “Protestant”, “Carmelite” or “Ignatian”. Yet, at the same time, fundamental ways of understanding such designations and their expressions change in significant ways.

3 Definition and Contemporary Meanings

Academically, “spirituality” has now begun to appear in disciplines well beyond the confines of theology or religious studies such as philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences.¹⁰ Equally, the concept has established itself in several professional and cultural fields of which the most common seem to be health-care, education, business, the arts, architecture, and urban design. There were also recent references by a leading (and overtly non-religious) UK politician to the need to recover the “spiritual” in politics. This means that even a specialist field such as theology must take note of many disciplines, methodologies, and domains of practice.¹¹

One result of the appearance of spirituality in such a range of contexts is that it is shaped by the concerns of each domain. “Spirituality” is now a chameleon. For example, I have been involved in a United States-based project on spirituality and healthcare. Here, there tends to be a focus on the themes of “healing”, “well-being”, and “care”. Indeed, some medical studies, for example by American psychiatrist Dr. Harold Koenig (involved in the same project), have noted a problem of tautology. That is, the ability to analyze the practical effectiveness of promoting spirituality in healthcare contexts is inhibited precisely because it is already defined in terms of positive psychological states such as peacefulness, harmony, and well-being.¹² Another example, in educational documents, is that “spirituality” tends to refer simply to the process of human maturation. Thus,

10 The magisterial work of Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters 2002), explores the breadth of the new academic field.

11 On the increasing variety of disciplines and definitions in relation to spirituality, see Peter Holmes, “Spirituality: Some Disciplinary Perspectives,” in *Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 23–41.

12 See Harold G. Koenig, “Concerns about measuring ‘spirituality’ in research,” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 196 (2008): 349–355.

the English government Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) seeks to provide for what it calls “spiritual development” in schools. This is defined as “the development of the non-material element of a human being, which animates and sustains us.” The purpose of including this in the school curriculum is: “... about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil’s ‘spirit.’”¹³

While a single, generic, comprehensive definition of “spirituality” is impossible precisely because it has such diverse expressions, there are some common characteristics among these expressions. As a starting point, in her classic work *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Evelyn Underhill suggests that human beings are vision-creating beings rather than merely tool-making animals.¹⁴ In other words, spirituality expresses the fact that humans are driven by goals beyond physical satisfaction or mental supremacy to seek what might be thought of as spiritual fulfilment. Others suggest that the word expresses a sense that the human search for meaning necessarily involves more than biological-genetic mechanics.¹⁵ Thus spirituality refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. It implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential.

Additionally, in a list of what might be called the family resemblances between expressions of spirituality, the concept implies, first, a holistic, integrated approach to life. It also involves a quest for “the sacred” understood in broad terms as the depth dimension of life. Further, it relates to a sense of goal and purpose. Yet again, it implies the development of the non-material element of life. It is also associated with human thriving. It involves a quest for virtue as against pure self-interest. Finally, and above all, spirituality evokes the sense of a self-reflective life as opposed to an unexamined life.

However, there are problems. First, it has been noted (for example in the writings of Harold Koenig and Jeremy Carrette, cited above) that the concept “spirituality” appears to embrace only what is comforting, good, and attractive. The question remains whether there can be tough spirituality. Is the notion of spirituality able to confront the dark or troubling side of our human existence? In other words, does it embrace a language of liberation or redemp-

13 Office for Standards in Education, *Promoting and Evaluating Pupils’ Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* (London: OFSTED, 2004), 12.

14 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993; orig. edition 1911, revised edition 1930), 16–17.

15 Steven Sutcliffe and Marian Bowman, eds., *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spiritualities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

tion? Second, if we leave aside some elements of business spirituality which refer to the corporate spirit, the broad range of modern definitions (not least those available on the Web) tend to emphasize the individual rather than the social aspect – personal experience, introspection, a subjective journey, personal well-being, inner harmony, or happiness. One example is the work on psychology and spirituality already mentioned.¹⁶ There are some exceptions which contrast the individualism, dualism, supernaturalism of past spirituality with a postmodern spirituality that better emphasises the interaction between the spiritual and society.¹⁷ Finally, is it morally appropriate to use the word “spirituality” in reference to the constructions of meaning and the values in groups widely judged to be destructive or even evil? Thus, may the concept of “spirituality” be validly applied to authoritarian religious cults or even to the quasi-mystical elements of a totalitarian movement such as the Nazi party? In my opinion, claims to a spiritual dimension need to be judged against certain criteria. In this context, a number of theologians, such as David Tracy at the University of Chicago, have developed what have been called “criteria of adequacy” and “criteria of appropriateness” for judging claims to religious-spiritual wisdom. The first refers to the fundamental demands of modern understandings of an adequate human life. These can therefore be applied broadly to the notion of spirituality wherever it is used. However, criteria of appropriateness refer to faithfulness to a specific religious tradition. Clearly the value of these criteria is more limited when addressed to practices or values outside the tradition concerned. However, both sets of criteria suggest that it is possible to think of certain quasi-spiritual but questionable movements less in terms of spirituality than in terms of anti-spirituality.¹⁸

The term “spirituality” has a more defined content when it is associated with historic religious traditions such as Christianity. Here, the “spiritual life” is the exemplification in the personal and corporate life of believers of the fundamental teachings and values of Christianity. In fact, the original source of the word spirituality lies in Christianity in reference to people living their lives “according to the Spirit of God” rather than according to a “worldly” spirit.¹⁹ It

16 Fontana, *Psychology*, 11–13.

17 See, e.g., David Ray Griffin, ed., *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

18 On such criteria of judgement, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury 1975), 64–79; Dermot Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (Dublin: Veritas, 1985), 26; Walter Principe, “Theological Trends: Pluralism in Christian Spirituality,” *The Way* 32 (1992), 54–61, especially 58–60.

19 For more details of the history of the term “spirituality” and of its equivalents in the Chris-

is important to underline that “the spiritual” is not separated from the physical or the everyday dimensions of life but implies a contrast with self-regarding materialism. In fact, rather than being another distinct element in human existence (alongside body and mind), “the spiritual” is best understood as the integrative factor in life. It implies life-as-such, or life-as-a-whole. The word itself relates to “the holy” which derives from the Greek *holos* – the whole rather than fragments of reality. The important point is that, in Christian terms, religion cannot be reduced to abstract beliefs but is directed at the pursuit of a transformative way of life.²⁰

Interestingly, some non-religious professionals who embrace the notion of spirituality openly acknowledge that they lack their own native vocabulary of “the spiritual”. They therefore seek to draw upon the language and even frameworks of value of a historic religion like Christianity to express this aspirational dimension of their concerns. For example, the internationally influential urban planner, Leonie Sandercock is a self-described secular humanist. Yet she talks and writes of her debt to religion, especially Christianity, in her adoption of the language of “hope”, “faith”, “service”, and “the sacred”. She even pleads with fellow urban planners to think in terms of creating “narratives of redemption”.²¹

Turning now to Christian spirituality and how it is studied, an important issue concerns how tradition and spiritual traditions function. I want to look briefly at four questions. Is it possible to bypass a historical perspective? Have spiritual traditions ever been pure and fixed? How do we approach geographical and cultural questions? Finally, what do we actually count as the content of spirituality?

4 Christian Spirituality and History

One of the most significant “ruptures” in contemporary Western cultures is from a sense of history in itself. We exist in a time of cultural change when the

tian tradition see Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: Orbis, 1998; orig. 1991), Chapter 2.

20 For further development of this point, see Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 2007), Chapter 1, especially 14–21 and 25–27.

21 See, for example, Leonie Sandercock, “Spirituality and the Urban Professionals: The Paradox at the Heart of Planning,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 7 (2006) 65–97. Her reference to narratives of redemption appeared in a lecture to theologians at the University of Manchester 2005, “Faith in the Post-Secular City.” See also her many references to “cities of spirit” in *Cosmopolis 11: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century* (London: Continuum, 2003).

question is often asked whether history has a value any longer. Are we rapidly becoming a history-less, memory-less culture focussed on immediacy? To base one's life on inherited traditions or to hark back to the past appears to be a distraction. Among students there is often an indifference to wisdom from a bygone age that is not immediately and demonstrably related to contemporary experiences and subjective needs. Equally alien is a sense of faithfulness to an inherited tradition to which we have a responsibility. "History" is now increasingly the preserve of the heritage industry to be packaged in charming and romantic ways for our entertainment.²²

In Booker Prize-winner Pat Barker's novel *Another World*, Geordie, an elderly veteran of the First World War is dying. He has particularly close relationships with two people. Helen, a professional historian who has recorded interviews with him and other veterans, has a fervent commitment to preserving memories for the sake of posterity. In contrast, Geordie's grandson Nick not only believes that "history" has no message for us but in fact does not really believe in history at all.

Well, you see the first thing is I don't believe in public memory. A memory is a biochemical change in an individual brain, and that's all there is ... And secretly, what he wants to say is that raking about in the detritus of other people's memories is a waste of time and energy. The only true or useful thing that can be said about the past is that it's over. It no longer exists.²³

This weariness with history relates to a number of factors. Rapid social changes, the decline of traditional social or working communities and our disconnection from familiar landscapes, places of family origin, and "home" have broken many people's sense of a living connection with the past. "History", and its sibling "tradition", are also perceived as conservative forces that sustain entrenched social, religious, and political divisions and from which we need to break free if we are to become more rational people. Perhaps the most powerful factor of all is the death of any notion of history-as-destiny, dominated by faith in the inevitability of progress. This nineteenth-century belief in "history" as a progressive force evaporated during the twentieth century in the face of the

22 For a more sustained treatment of this theme, see Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: Theology, History and Social Practice*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), Chapter 1: "Spirituality and History: Contexts and Memories."

23 Pat Barker, *Another World* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 85 and 87.

multiple horrors of two world wars, mid-century totalitarianism, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

5 Narrative and the Reconstruction of History

Yet, someone like the French Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur sought to reconstruct a viable sense of “time” and “historical consciousness”. These, he argued, are vital to our identities – and, implicitly, to our spiritual well-being.

At first glance, Ricoeur was a paradox. On the one hand, he shared a post-modern scepticism of meta-narratives and of attempts by historical interpretation “to decipher the supreme plot”.²⁴ However, he also argued that the search for a meta-narrative actually undermined *true* narrative because it reduced history to “the totalisation of time in the eternal present”.²⁵ If we reject the possibility of mediating narratives completely this is not the liberating experience that it may appear. On the contrary, it is profoundly oppressive for without historical narrative we risk two things. First we undermine a key element of human solidarity (we bond together by sharing stories) and second we remove a key incentive for changing the *status quo* as well as an important means of bringing this about.

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.²⁶

Ricoeur sought to overcome the division between history as factual “truth” and stories as “fiction”.²⁷ In fact, both employ a plot to suggest a pattern for otherwise episodic events. Every plot chooses a sequence for events and characters that underlines a direction or movement. This is shaped by a particular point of view. Ricoeur attempted to retrieve history as more than merely a set of cold, objectified “facts” emptied of the warmth of human stories. “History” once again has something to do with people’s vision and commitment. The idea of commitment points to the fact that “history” is not merely about the past but also about the present and future. A historical consciousness opens us to possible action rather than to a passive acceptance of “the way things are”.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 103.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 3*, 202.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984), 75.

²⁷ See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 1*, Part II: “History and Narrative.”

6 Politics and Historical Presentation

The question of historical interpretations and commitments reminds us again of the matter of “politics”. In this context, and among a range of issues, a major question is “Who is allowed to appear? Who is allowed to have a history?” This is vital because those who have no story and are not remembered have, in a sense, no life. History is not a matter of straight-forward narrative presentation, contrary to nineteenth-century historicism (for example, Leopold von Ranke), which believed that it was possible to achieve objective knowledge of the past by leaving behind our own horizons. There is a difference between the actual historical process which involves everyone, but to which we do not actually have access, and *recorded* history in which only some people are allowed to be active participants. Turning briefly to a textbook of spirituality that was a classic in a previous age, Pierre Pourrat’s four volume history, *La Spiritualité Chrétienne*, his unquestioned, theologically-driven account emphasized the centrality and unity of spiritual *doctrine* across the ages. Two things followed from this. First, lay and popular spirituality received little or no attention because they were not judged as sufficiently theological. Second, judgments about what counted as “dissenting” spiritualities were driven by a rather ultra-montane, centralized understanding of the tradition. Dissenters (and, thinking of the Low Countries, the Beguines counted as unorthodox dissenters in Pourrat’s mind) were only mentioned in reference to their demise and the triumph of orthodoxy.²⁸

7 Are Traditions Pure?

A further question concerns the supposed autonomy and purity of each spiritual tradition. There has sometimes been an unbalanced emphasis on “rupture” and the distinctiveness of specific traditions in interpretations of Christian spirituality. By “rupture” I mean an emphasis on radical discontinuities and difference. This approach may be methodologically driven by a search for more precise boundaries and definitions. However, it may also be ideologically driven by the need to defend the integrity of one spiritual tradition by underlining an intentional break with the past or contrast with what is “other”. This line of thought is not sympathetic to any idea of mutual spiritual influences and borrowings.

28 P. Pourrat, *La spiritualité chrétienne*, 4 vols. (Paris: Gabalda, 1918).

Thus, in the not too distant past, many studies of spirituality created hard boundaries between, first, what came before and after historically; second, between one spiritual tradition and another; and, finally, between the spiritual ethos of different faiths. In reality, spiritual traditions have never been pure in the sense of entirely original, self-contained, and free from a process of borrowing ideas and practices from beyond their own boundaries. Two examples serve to illustrate what I mean. The first, well-rehearsed example is a long-held assumption that Protestantism and its spiritual traditions had clearly distanced themselves from the previous corruptions of the Western Catholic Church. The second example is the question of the influence of other faiths on Christian spiritualities.

8 Spiritual Ruptures: 1. Catholic-Protestant

Our sense of the continuity or discontinuity between the spiritualities of the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation may be affected by an apparently simple matter of how and where authors decide to divide a multi-volume history. Do we place the Protestant and Catholic Reformations at the end of the mediaeval volume or do we deal with them as the first item in the volume on the “modern era”?²⁹ I have analyzed elsewhere why an absolute approach to the rupture between Protestant and Catholic types of spirituality is unhelpful and even inaccurate.³⁰ The perception that Protestant spirituality broke from its mediaeval antecedents largely originates in the nineteenth century rather than earlier. It is now more generally recognized that a reformer like Martin Luther continued to esteem such mediaeval spiritual writers as Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Thomas à Kempis. Indeed, Luther produced his own edition of the *Theologia Deutsch* or *Theologia Germanica*, an anonymous fourteenth-century mystical text, perhaps by a priest of the Teutonic Order, perhaps (according to some analyses of the language) by Eckhart. Indeed, a recent English translation of Martin Luther’s spiritual writings rejects the conventional periodisation of the Protestant Reformation by positioning Luther explicitly within the late-mediaeval world.³¹ More surprisingly

29 Jill Raitt, ed., *Christian Spirituality 11: High Middle Ages & Reformation* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), Introduction.

30 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 206–213.

31 See *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). On Luther as a late-mediaeval figure, see *Luther’s Spirituality*, ed. Philip Krey and Peter Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007).

perhaps, seventeenth-century English Puritans (orthodox Calvinists) such as Isaac Ambrose explicitly cited mediaeval Cistercian writers, especially Bernard of Clairvaux (both their commentaries on the Song of Songs and the broader tradition of bridal mysticism) as sources for their own mystical piety.³²

9 Spiritual Ruptures: 2. Christianity and Islam

More contentious is the influence on Christian spiritual traditions of other religions (apart from the Jewish scriptures and mediaeval Jewish thinkers) prior to the impact of contemporary interfaith dialogue. There are some tantalizing possibilities in the late-mediaeval period that are simply ignored in many standard studies. Among the more likely possibilities is the impact of Islamic thought on late-mediaeval Spanish spiritual and mystical writers. The “dialogue” between Islamic thought and the Catalan mystical theologian Ramon Llull is broadly accepted. However, as far as I can tell, the more recent work of Professor Luce López-Baralt, a specialist on Christian-Muslim interaction in Iberia, is largely unknown outside specialist circles. She suggests that the Al-Andalus school of Sufism, with its emphasis both on spiritual illumination and spiritual drunkenness, influenced the Christian *alumbrados*, many of whom came from convert Jewish or Moorish families (one explanation for the intense suspicion of *conversos* by the Inquisition). She also postulates the influence of Sufism on the early sixteenth-century Franciscan mystics Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo, both of whom influenced Teresa of Avila. However, more interestingly, Baralt outlines in some detail her controversial assessment of the impact of Sufism on the language and symbolism of John of the Cross – for example, the notion of ecstatic fire and burning flames of love in the poem *Llama de amor viva*, and the imagery of flowing water and the fountain of the soul in stanza 12 of the *Spiritual Canticle*.³³ Another more speculative possibility is an unproven Sufi influence on the third kind of prayer (prayer of the breath) in the appendix to Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. However, Sufi

32 For example, see the unpublished PhD thesis by Tom Schwanda, “Soul Recreation: Spiritual Marriage and Ravishment in the Contemplative-Mystical Piety of Isaac Ambrose” (Durham: Durham University, 2009).

33 See for example, Luce López-Baralt, *San Juan de la Cruz y el Islam: Estudios sobre las filiaciones semíticas de su literatura mística*, (Madrid: Hiperion, 1990) and *The Sufi “trobar clus” and Spanish Mysticism: A Shared Symbolism* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2000). Some John of the Cross scholars suspect that Baralt reads too much into the material but nevertheless believe there may be some Islamic influences.

meditative forms were probably themselves influenced by a cross-over from the “prayer of the heart” in Eastern Christian hesychasm. Indeed, possible connections between hesychasm and the Ignatian Exercises were noted in the past by Irenée Hausherr.³⁴

10 Geography and Culture: Traditioning

Studies in spirituality have also chosen geographical-cultural boundaries and concepts of “centre” and “edge” or “periphery”. Historical significance is often judged in relation to a historical process centred on rulers, popes, and power-structures. The tendency, then, was to adopt a geographical-cultural framework which reflected the significant orbits of national, “high European”, or more broadly, world politics (wherever “the world” is deemed to be centred). In mainstream studies of Christian spirituality, the focus was usually confined to Western Europe and to mainstream Eastern Orthodoxy. For example, in Western Catholic terms, Celtic Christianity was relegated to a footnote on the margins of history until its recent (sometimes uncritical and over-romantic) retrieval.³⁵ In global terms, many of the ancient Christian traditions in the Middle East, Ethiopia, and South India (Syriac, Coptic, Assyrian, Nestorian) were largely ignored (with some exceptions in the Syriac tradition, for example, the poetry of St. Ephrem). In contemporary global, multi-cultural terms, the approach to spirituality of someone like the Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has become fairly mainstream in wider Christian thought. However, the focus is often on his theme of spiritual liberation from social and political oppression. Yet, Gutierrez is just as concerned to outline a different approach to the overall communication and transmission of spiritual traditions. He promotes a move from missionary-centred approaches, where non-Europeans are passive recipients of traditions brought from elsewhere, to “indigenization” whereby spirituality is “reborn” locally in conversation with entirely new circumstances. As the English title of his classic book suggests, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*.³⁶

34 See Irenée Hausherr, “Les Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace et la méthode d’oraison hésychaste,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 20 (1954): 7–26.

35 On some of the issues of retrieval and interpretation in Celtic Christian spirituality, see Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), especially Introduction and Chapter 1.

36 Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (Maryknoll: Orbis 2003), especially Part 1.

This new approach, not least in spirituality, has led to an important development – the notion of “traditioning” – among Christians of Central and Latin America as they confront the issue of appropriating, resisting, or re-appropriating historic spiritual traditions and practices. Some of the most interesting work has been done by Latino/a women and men in the United States. The fundamental question is how the Christian tradition (in this case, spirituality) transmits itself and how it is received across cultural boundaries. While clearly there is a question of “content” (that is, something specific is “traditioned”), the emphasis within the notion of “traditioning” is far more on the *process* of transmission.

There are four key considerations in traditioning related to the reframing of classic spirituality. First, there needs to be attention to *culture*. That is, the process whereby a classic tradition, born in one culture and already reshaped by other cultures, now enters a further cultural context. The second consideration is that we must attend to *lo cotidiano* – the everyday – that is, the critical re-appropriation of a spiritual tradition that takes place in relation to the questions, situations, and tendencies that constitute the daily human life in the local community confronting an inherited tradition. The third is the need to give a higher valuation to popular religion. Christian spirituality has too often been circumscribed by a conceptual, content-driven and, consequently, elitist set of presuppositions. In terms of “spirituality”, greater attention to popular religion will embrace expressions of the sacred in rituals, devotions, cultic objects, shrines, and practices such as pilgrimage. Finally, “traditioning” invites us to consider how the transmission and even development of traditions relies not simply on self-designated authorities (such as clergy, religious orders, technical commentators) but on a consensus of reflection and reception by the rest of the Christian community (who in reality are the “ordinary” transmitters of tradition).³⁷

11 What Counts as Spirituality?

Finally, the emphasis on the significance of popular religion in the approach to spirituality in “traditioning”, reminds us that what counts as a “spiritual tradition” has often been severely constrained. There is still a tendency to

37 On the principles of “traditioning” see Orlando O. Espin & Gary Macy, eds., *Futuring our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition*, Maryknoll: Orbis 2006, especially pages 1–22; Orlando O. Espin, “Traditioning: Culture, Daily Life and Popular Religion and Their Impact on Christian Tradition.”

prioritize relatively sophisticated mystical-contemplative texts or specialist contexts such as monasticism over more popular forms of writing or practice. Equally, references to material culture as a context for spirituality have been virtually absent until recently. I suggest that these preferences mask theological assumptions that are frequently unexamined. These can be related to a series of polarities that in themselves express a hierarchy of values – for example, interiority versus public or social existence, experience versus action (which also tends to underpin a separation of spirituality and ethics), an elevated or protected spiritual realm versus the everyday, an idealized other-worldly future versus the messiness of the contingent present. At the heart of these polarities lies a more fundamental contrast between “the sacred” (interpreted as “the wholly other”) and “the secular”. The latter is no longer St. Augustine’s *saeculum*, in other words, the everyday world, but is absorbed into “the profane” with its negative connotation of what is actively *opposed* to “the spiritual”. This process represents the impact of the great historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, who was theologically influenced by a particular understanding of Luther’s distinction between Two Kingdoms derived from Rudolph Otto’s classic work, *Das Heilige*.³⁸

On this reading of “the sacred”, the practice and study of spirituality is set apart from the public realm and from practices of everyday life including any serious attention to material culture. More recently, however, groundbreaking writing has begun to appear on Christian spirituality in relation to “the vernacular” – for example, art and aesthetics, architecture and urban design, sport, food, and clothing.³⁹

In questioning and re-reading these preferences, the thought of the French Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau is particularly illuminating. De Certeau, a disciple of Henri de Lubac and his Augustinian theology, began as a historian of Christian spirituality and during the 1960s was one of the early theorists of spirituality as a modern academic discipline. Even though he moved intellectually more towards the social sciences and cultural theory in later life, as well

38 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1987).

39 On spirituality and aesthetics, see: Bill Hall and David Jasper, eds., *Art & the Spiritual* (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2003); on cities and design see Philip Sheldrake, “A Spiritual City: Urban Vision and the Christian Tradition,” in Sigurd Bergmann, ed. *Theology in Built Environments: Exploring Religion, Architecture & Design* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009), 121–141; see also Susie Hayward, “Spirituality and Clothing,” and “Spirituality and Food,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM, 2005), 197–199 and 305–307.

as personally towards the margins of Christianity, de Certeau is slowly being recovered as a religious thinker, preoccupied until the end of his life with how to rethink Christian practice in an increasingly post-religious West. In this light, it is not too far-fetched to see his later reflections on everyday practices (for example, architecture, the city, travel, cooking, and even shopping) as influenced by broadly spiritual values as well as by social-cultural analysis.⁴⁰

12 Conclusion

I want to end by returning briefly to my opening comments about the “politics” of spirituality. Christian spirituality overall, or the specific spiritual traditions within it, are not simple fixed artefacts but fluid processes. As living narratives, spiritual traditions are organized in a form that offers coherence. In other words, the guardians and interpreters of historic traditions persistently promote a *sequence* for events and personalities that suggests a direction rather than something purely accidental. However, we must approach this critically. A sense of organisation or direction is shaped by particular viewpoints and this inevitably “edits” a spiritual tradition in certain ways. A number of critical questions may usefully be addressed to this process. First, who has traditionally controlled a particular spiritual tradition and to what degree have the language and practices of a spiritual tradition come to reflect the interests of elite groups? Second, what directions were not taken? In other words, to what degree have we assumed that the choices made were necessarily superior to other possibilities that were rejected? Finally, in relation to Christian spirituality as a whole, where are the spiritual traditions that did not fit? Why do some traditions disappear for a time only to re-emerge later? Clearly, a neo-Darwinian natural selection theory – the survival of the fittest – rather than a political reading is not adequate. How do we explain the absorption of a distinctive Celtic Christianity into a homogenized Latin Christianity but its re-emergence during the twentieth century? Nor, without a political reading of spirituality, can we effectively address the question of the mediaeval spiritual movement of women, the Beguines – condemned as unorthodox at the Council of Vienne in the fourteenth century yet rediscovered in recent decades as a spiritual tradition of major importance, not least in its outstanding mystical literature.

40 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1998).

We must all be self-critical. All of us employ interpretative frameworks. Indeed, we cannot avoid them. We need to cultivate a critical self-awareness of our own assumptions and the ways they tend to exclude, edit, or erase from our consideration certain events, people, and practices.

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