

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Pluralism in Christian Spirituality

**S**PIRITUALITY' MAY BE UNDERSTOOD in several different but related ways: (1) as the real or existential level of lived experience, (2) as the spiritual doctrines and practices of significant groups or different spiritual traditions, and (3) as a discipline or study.<sup>1</sup> Understood as a person's lived experience, Christian spirituality is completely pluralistic since no two persons live their Christian life in the Spirit in precisely the same way—each person's spirituality is unique and particular. This uniqueness of lived experience is true in the first place of the supreme exemplar of Christian spirituality, Jesus Christ. Under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus lived his unique vocation as the beloved Son of God in his own time and place. Imitation of Jesus Christ will always be incomplete, not only because no one else possesses his divine-and-human way of being but also because each Christian has a special calling and special gifts within her or his personal history. This article, therefore, is a study of the second level: Christian spirituality as lived and expressed by significant groups or different spiritual traditions, whose spirituality has often resulted from the life and teaching of influential individuals.

It is easily seen, from Acts and the letters of Paul as well as from the four gospel accounts, that from the very beginning Christians experienced and lived the mystery of Jesus Christ in different ways and therefore already had somewhat different spiritualities. Even the name 'Christian' at first distinguished only the followers of Christ at Antioch (Acts 11, 26). Early Christians were deeply divided as to whether or not they were obliged to continue the practices of the Jewish law. The synoptic gospels reflect early questions about whether Christians should fast (Mark 2, 18-20 and parallels). And Paul's concern for the many problems among his Gentile converts led him to develop theological and spiritual insights not shared by other early Christians.

Despite their similarities, the synoptic writers emphasize different aspects of the good news: Mark stresses the coming of God's kingdom, especially through Jesus's passion and death; Matthew and Luke give important spiritual teachings in their accounts of Jesus's sermons; Matthew's ecclesial interests differ somewhat from Luke's frequent portrayal of God's compassion revealed through Jesus Christ or from Luke's many references to Jesus's prayer. The distinctive Johannine Gospel presents Jesus as the Word of God sent by the Father to reveal the Father, to call for faith in himself, and to promise the beginning of eternal life already in our earthly existence through his word, his gift of his eucharistic body and blood, and his sending the Holy Spirit from the Father. The first letter of Peter has strongly

influenced some spiritual traditions by its teaching about our sharing the divine nature and about every Christian as a sharer in the priesthood of Christ. James and Paul give different weight to the roles of faith and works in Christian life.

In patristic and later periods, each of the many varieties of Christian spirituality that developed sought to follow the gospel. Nevertheless, each emphasized different aspects of the gospel in its teaching, liturgy, devotional practices, and forms of expression. The many strands of reflection on Jesus and his gospel called forth different responses as the gospel was preached, received, and inculturated in the early Church. This inculturation process led the fathers of the Church to develop the theme of catholicity, that is, the variety in which the one faith was expressed and lived as the gospel spread to different peoples and cultures.

Some of the most striking variations were those between the east and west, for example, between eastern stress on liturgy and Christ's resurrection on the one hand, and western concentration on moral doctrine, original sin and Christ's passion on the other. Within these larger traditions further differences emerged, for example, between Syrian and Byzantine spiritualities in the east, and among Celtic, Gallic, Germanic and Latin spiritualities in the west. Still further variations occurred within these. Various ways of living the gospel in different times, places and cultures are evident in the rise of various forms of monasticism among men and women in both the east and the west. This development was followed by other forms of religious life: those of canons regular, mendicants, including second orders of nuns and third orders of laywomen and laymen, men and women religious professing simple vows or promises, and secular institutes. Lay spirituality expressed itself in many forms of popular piety, for example, in the building of shrines and cathedrals, in pilgrimages, in associations such as guilds, confraternities, and societies engaged in works of social justice and charity, in retreats, Catholic Action and Cursillo groups, or in charismatic and other movements.

In the west, one of the most significant examples of pluralism in spirituality was the split between Protestant and Catholic spiritualities, especially as different emphases in the spiritual life arose from doctrinal differences about the doctrine of grace and works, the relations of word and sacrament, and theologies of the Church. Within many Christian churches, the present century has seen significant changes in spiritual outlook. The Second Vatican Council, through its renewed emphasis on the word of God in scripture, liturgy and preaching, and through its espousal of ecumenism, has affected not only Catholic but also Anglican and Protestant spirituality. For Catholics the council opened the way to specific spiritualities, as is clear from the troubled and sometimes belligerent reaction of those attached to spiritual traditions deriving from baroque times or from more recent Christian experience. One of the Council's most remarkable teachings was its recognition and positive evaluation of the differences between the eastern

and western Churches not only in liturgy, theology, and discipline, but also in spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Increasing official and theological insistence on the need for inculturation of the gospel throughout the world has led to recognition of the need for pluralism in spirituality. Pluralism in theology has also been recognized, especially by Pope Paul VI, and such theological pluralism has important consequences for spirituality.<sup>3</sup> Pluralism in Christian spirituality arises today from the following developments: new views of Christian anthropology; the elaboration of political theology and social criticism; ecumenical dialogue and mutual influence among churches; the emergence of base communities and various forms of liberation theology; the rise of feminist concerns in theology and spirituality; the impact of contemporary natural sciences and technology; related to this latter development, a growing consciousness of the relation of creation values and ecology to spiritual life; a more holistic view of the human person; greater emphasis on the role of experience in theology and study of spirituality; and new psychological, sociological, linguistic and hermeneutical developments applied within spirituality. The interaction between Christians and adherents of other religions, including native religions, has introduced new forms of spirituality within Christian traditions, and is partially responsible for a renewed interest in self-discipline and mystical experience.

#### *Criteria for judging spiritualities*

Given the great variety and, in some cases, the novelty of contemporary approaches to spirituality, the question of the criteria to be used in judging what is authentic Christian spirituality takes on even greater importance. Judgements of authentic Christian spirituality must be based not on the approach of purely secular religious studies using only natural reasoning, but rather on theological principles developed within a faith community. However, these theological principles and judgements must be elaborated within a theology that is not solely deductive and prescriptive. The needed theology or theologies must be (1) open to experience both contemporary and historical; (2) multidisciplinary (including the contributions of contemporary psychology, sociology, politics, economics, science and technology, aesthetics, anthropology, linguistics, hermeneutics, etc.); (3) ecumenical with respect to other Christian churches; (4) ready to learn from non-Christian religious traditions and so from the contributions of comparative religion; (5) aware of the need for inculturation and catholicity. Finally, as has been the case throughout history, the decisive test of such authenticity lies in the *fruits* of the spirituality in question. Even here, however, there may well be different judgements: feminist or liberation or third-world theologians, for example, would question the fruits of some spiritualities that have been highly praised even in canonization processes, especially if these spiritualities bear the marks of patriarchy, unrestricted capitalism, racism, colonialism, selfish individualism, tendencies that are self-destructive (as in anti-human mortifications) or other evil consequences.

Several basic criteria may be suggested for judging the authenticity of any form or tradition of Christian spirituality:

(1) Is it faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it therefore Trinitarian? Does it recognize the priority over human effort of God's graciousness and of Jesus's saving work accepted in faith? Does it recognize the importance of liturgical celebration, especially of Baptism and the Eucharist within an ecclesial community? Does it foster both personal and social growth? Does it emphasize not only charity but also personal and social justice, as well as the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit? Does it teach the value of the beatitudes taught by Jesus's sermons, and does it invite Christians to the foolishness of the cross in the hope of resurrection with Christ? Although the search for such fidelity to the gospel inevitably raises questions about how to interpret the gospel message, to ignore the need for constant testing of any spirituality by the gospel would be to opt for inauthenticity.

(2) Is it truly catholic, that is, does it include all the major aspects of the gospel teaching, or does it so concentrate on some components as to ignore other important elements of the gospel message? For although different ways of living the gospel message give rise to legitimate, rich variety and pluralism in spirituality, any tradition or doctrine that over-emphasizes some aspects—for example, the physical sufferings of Christ while neglecting his loving obedience in this suffering or his resurrection, or the importance of creation and temporal realities while downplaying the mediatory role of Christ and the originating and beatifying importance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—would call into question the Christian validity of such a tradition or doctrine.

(3) Is it sufficiently inculturated so as to be able to evoke a deep, genuine response from those to whom it is proposed and handed on, or is it so foreign to the culture of peoples that it floats above the surface of their real life and experience? The failure to inculturate the gospel message and authentic spiritualities derived from it must evoke a serious critique of spiritual teachings and practices that fail to sink deeply into the cultural realities of different peoples. Such failure is evidenced by the growth of syncretist offshoots of Christianity in former mission countries, by the indifference of so many people in traditionally Christian countries, and by the attraction of New Age religion and other spurious spiritualities that respond to the felt needs of many persons in contemporary culture.

(4) In fidelity to the gospel, does it respect the dignity and rights of the human person, fostering maturity rather than childish dependence, freedom in the Holy Spirit rather than fear and servility, healthy respect for human values even while calling for growth through the cross and through risen life in the Spirit above and beyond a merely natural existence? Every Christian spirituality must indeed aim at bringing Christians 'to mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children . . .' (Eph 4, 13-14).

*Probing questions to help understand and judge spiritualities*

In order better to understand the pluralism of spiritualities and to judge their Christian authenticity, we may ask a series of probing questions to help discern their theological and related dimensions. Since these dimensions are often only implicit, the function of such questioning is to make their presence or absence explicit. If the fuller theological dimensions of such spiritualities are not uncovered, important elements for understanding the distinctiveness and for judging the authenticity of such spiritualities can be missed. A partial list of such questions may illustrate their usefulness.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, for example, one should ask what view of God is involved in any spirituality. Is God seen as Father, as Mother, as personal or simply as impersonal Creator? Is God considered a Friend, Companion, Consoler, Bridegroom, Shepherd, Rock, Judge, Lord, Majesty, King, Gracious Lover, the Unknowable, the Hidden, the Mysterious, the Awesome, the Ineffable, the Ground of Being? In this questioning one can observe within each spirituality which views of God are central, which are peripheral, and which are neglected. Criticism would be in order if there were a literal, unduly extended, or exclusive use of any metaphors. On the other hand, if properly analogical concepts such as being, good, person, cause, etc., were applied univocally, such practice would fail to respect the transcendence and mystery of God, and would also have to be rejected as inauthentic. So also should any spirituality be judged insufficient that eliminates views of the Christian God as personal, or that imagines or speaks of God or the persons of the Trinity as exclusively masculine or feminine.

Again, what emphasis is given in a particular spirituality to personhood in God? Neglect of the Trinitarian persons in favour of a uni-personal God would be insufficient, as would stress on only one or two of the three persons to the partial or total neglect of the other persons or person. For example, a Christocentrism that neglects the Holy Spirit or that fails to see Christ as leading to the God who is both Father and Mother would need completion or correction. Exclusive attention to the Holy Spirit would also be defective.

Further, what is the view of the goal of the human person's life in the Spirit? Spiritualities sometimes differ in their views of this goal. For Christians, any goal other than union with the Trinitarian God would have to be excluded, as would any idea that the human subject loses personal identity when attaining union with God.

What is the place given to Jesus Christ? Spiritualities should be examined and judged as to their views of Christ's role in revelation, in saving or freeing, in overcoming sin, in the communication of grace and salvation, in his past and present activity in individual Christians, in the Church, in the whole of human history. How is the fundamental biblical revelation of Jesus as exalted to be Kyrios/Lord (Phil 2, 5-11) incorporated into the spirituality being examined? Christ's relation to liturgical, communal, and personal prayer should be investigated. For example, it would be an aberration for Christian prayer to set aside Jesus from the beginning of centring prayer or

in search of mystical experience (Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, among others, express strong rejection of doing so until a person receives a discernible call to passive contemplation).

What is the role of scripture and tradition in different spiritualities? Are both honoured and operative? A fundamentalist reading of scripture, as well as using various forms of historico-critical or literary approaches without attention to the spiritual dimensions of the texts, are insufficient for Christian spirituality.

Is care taken to distinguish between authentic Tradition and particular, changeable traditions? Failure to do so can affect the validity of spiritual teaching. This is true not only of the Tradition and traditions of Catholic faith, but also of the tradition and traditions of particular spiritualities. This tension becomes clear, for example, when religious communities attempt to recover the charism of their founder, a task that requires discernment of the authentic tradition from others that are partial and time- or culture-bound.

Other questions that can help to see the particularity of different spiritualities and aid judgement of their authenticity include the following:

What is the view of the human person? Is the person seen as an integral whole or as split into a body-soul dichotomy? How are human emotions judged? What relative place is given to the body, to sensation, to imagination, to emotional life, to intellect and to will? A holistic view taking account of and giving value to each component must be judged a better Christian spirituality than others that downplay some of these elements.

What is the view of human worth and human growth? Is the doctrine or tradition psychologically sound? Is good psychology used in presenting spiritual teaching and assistance?

What comparative weight does a particular spirituality give to knowledge and love, or to contemplation and action as means to union with God? Different emphases are not only legitimate but fruitful, but any spirituality that would reject any of these means would be open to serious criticism.

What is the relation between one's personal efforts and God's gracious help? Is there a latent Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, stressing human effort as primary rather than God's loving initiative?

How are meditation, prayer, mental prayer, contemplation, mystical experience and mystical prayer understood? Is mystical contemplation viewed as a normal development of the Christian life or as something so extraordinary that it cannot be sought or hoped for?

How integral to life in the Spirit are liturgy in general, the sacraments and communal celebrations?

What is the view of evil, of sin, of original sin and its effects, of evil social structures?

How is suffering viewed? How is it related to Christ crucified? What is the role of carrying the cross after Christ? How are Christ's resurrection and his continuing risen life related to his passion and death? Is there a balanced view of the relations between the passion and resurrection?

What virtues are most stressed, and are some neglected or played down? In particular, are social concerns and social justice seen as integral to a mature spirituality?

What is the predominant view of history and of eschatology for the spirituality in question? Is the virtue of hope for the present and future a predominant part of the outlook?

What is the role of work in the spiritual life? Of everyday work, secular or religious? Of ministry and other apostolic work? What importance is given to recreation, to play, to exercise, to food and drink?

What is the place of good cultural activities? Of marriage? Of children? Of human sexuality in general and in practice?

What is the attitude towards the 'world', the devil, towards those who declare themselves to be against God or at least to be indifferent to God?

What is the attitude towards extraordinary phenomena such as visions, locutions, ecstasies, miracles, prophecies, speaking in tongues, healings?

What is the role of authority? Of doctrinal authority and Church teaching? Is there discernment of the different levels of Church teaching and of the relative weight of different pronouncements?<sup>25</sup>

What is the role of the 'assistant to self-counselling' (a better term than 'spiritual director' or 'spiritual guide' or 'spiritual counsellor')? Are such persons too dominant or do they serve the mature spiritual growth of the persons they are assisting?

A number of other questions should be put to any text that is studied in spirituality. These should include examination of the use of literary forms and devices as a window into the imaginary world of the author. Attention should be paid to the level of thought and language used—some authors are more psychological in approach, others more phenomenological, some are more theological or philosophical, while others are more autobiographical. The historical context, general and religious, of an author as well as of the author's spiritual life and writings, should be considered. Attention should also be paid to the special temperament and personality of the author and the way this affects the writing.

Awareness of the life context of an important person or group or spiritual tradition is crucial for overcoming a frequent lapse in the study of spirituality. The writings of such persons, groups or traditions usually stress certain elements of spirituality, sometimes because they perceive a need or lack that should be addressed (eg, different ways of prayer, the need for poverty or asceticism, etc.). They may well say nothing about fundamental aspects of their spirituality that they take for granted. An example of this, often found in monastic or mendicant authors, is their relative silence about their liturgical and sacramental life and its place in the spiritual life. Studies of their spirituality that neglect this or other aspects taken for granted fail to grasp the complete spirituality of such persons or groups, or even some of its most important elements. Questions such as those indicated above can be a help in calling attention to these aspects.

While the pluralism of spiritualities thus raises many issues and problems for understanding and judgement, this pluralism should nevertheless be viewed as one of the most significant revelations of God's wisdom and goodness. What Thomas Aquinas says about the diversity of gifts of grace applies to the diversity of authentic spiritualities: 'The first cause of this diversity is to be found in God, who dispenses the gifts of divine grace in different ways so that from these diverse modalities there should arise the beauty and perfection of the church'.<sup>6</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the following by this author: 'Toward defining spirituality', *SR: Studies in religion/Sciences religieuses* 12 (1983) pp 127-41; *Thomas Aquinas' spirituality* (The Étienne Gilson Series, 7; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984); 'Spirituality, Christian', and 'Spirituality, Western medieval', both in the forthcoming *New Catholic dictionary of spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press).

<sup>2</sup> See 'Decree on Ecumenism' [*Unitatis redintegratio*], nos 14-17; original Latin text with English translation in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols, ed Norman E. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) 2: *Trent to Vatican II*, pp 916-18.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Address of Pope Paul VI to the International Theological Commission', *The Pope speaks* 14 (1969) pp 200-203; original Latin text [*Membris Commissionis Theologicae Internationalis, primum plenarium Coetum habentibus*] (6 October 1969) in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 61 (1969) pp 713-16.

<sup>4</sup> I have worked out, with students, colleagues and friends, a long list of some such questions for use in reading texts of spiritual authors. The list grows continually, especially in view of the multidisciplinary and hermeneutical questions that need to be asked. Because of limitations of space, only some are indicated here.

<sup>5</sup> On this subject see this author's 'Changing Church teachings', *Grail: an ecumenical journal* 6 (1990) pp 13-40, and *Faith, history and cultures: stability and change in Church teachings* (The Père Marquette Lecture, 1991; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> *Summa theologiae* 1-2, q 112, a 4 resp. He adds that this diversity in gifts of grace is analogous to the case of creation: '... just as God also established diverse grades of things so that there should be a perfect universe', Cf *ibid.* 1, q 47, a 1.