

# THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE TEACHER

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**H**OW DOES THE TEACHER'S OWN SPIRITUALITY affect his or her teaching of spirituality? What role, if any, should the spirituality of the teacher play in the teaching of spirituality? Must teachers of spirituality teach only those spiritualities that have significantly influenced their own life? Or does teaching one's own spirituality run the risk of manipulating students?

The appearance of spirituality in the academy in the past several decades has prompted some serious conversation about the teaching of spirituality in academic settings.<sup>1</sup> Our concern here will be primarily with the teaching of spirituality in a formative sense, the sense that Ewart Cousins referred to in his claim, "The transmission of spiritual wisdom may be the oldest discipline in human history".<sup>2</sup> This transmission now often takes place in classroom settings – from the church basement to the seminary and graduate-school lecture-hall. And classroom settings, especially in higher education, evoke a set of expectations about critical distance, even-handed treatment, non-proselytizing, and objective research projects. Where do these expectations leave the teacher of spirituality?

In fields other than that of spirituality, this may not be such an important question. For instance, no one would insist that a world-history teacher in North America in 1995 must have experienced something of every cultural context he or she presents. Not only is such a thing impossible, but there is a common assumption that through second-hand or even third-hand accounts, teachers are able to gain enough knowledge of cultural context to convey its essence to students.

On the other hand, in certain fields the teacher's experience of what is taught often takes on a great deal of importance. For instance, women's studies programmes will usually attempt to establish faculties composed primarily of women. Likewise, African-American studies programmes assume that it is vital for most, if not all, of their teachers to know the experience of the African-American culture from within. These and other groups claim the right to name their experience themselves.

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Similarly, in certain Christian colleges, universities and seminaries, teachers are required to sign a statement of faith indicating that they share the same doctrinal stances as those espoused by the institution in which they teach. In this way, the institution hopes to ensure that students learn a particular form of the Christian life. On the other hand, learning institutions which represent something of a tradition of classical liberalism shun formal expressions of adherence to a single doctrinal stance. Instead, they emphasize freedom of expression and open inquiry in whatever direction their search for adequacy and truth may be found.

But when it comes to teaching spirituality, what stance is appropriate? Before we address that question, we need to be clear about what we mean by 'spirituality'.

We are defining spirituality as the ongoing, transformational experience of intentional, conscious engagement with the presence of God. This engagement with divine presence can be seen to involve three dynamics: nurturing or preparing for interaction with the presence of God, the affective human experience of interaction with the presence of God, and intentionally responding to that presence. Put another way, a person's spirituality is her or his lived pattern of engaging the presence of the Holy, becoming intimate with the presence of God.

The teacher of spirituality assumes that this lived pattern can be identified, traced, charted, characterized and described to another in a way that genuinely captures something of its essence. Thus, a teacher may introduce a student to a particular spirituality by describing its practices, attitudes, experiences, socio-historical context and conceptualizations. Such a description may include identifying ideal practices which foster progress toward the goal of the spiritual tradition, tracing the experiences of a person over time as she or he lives this spirituality, and characterizing its primary images or assumptions about deity, humans and Scriptures.

But can this be? Can a spirituality that has not significantly influenced the experience of the teacher be accurately traced, charted, characterized and described to another by that teacher? If so, in what sense? How do we draw the line between the kind of commitment that makes a course exciting and a manipulative proselytizing? Can one, in fact, properly teach a spirituality which has not influenced one's own experience?

We believe that it is possible to teach properly and appropriately a spirituality other than one's own, but it is essential to be clear about what 'properly' means. To explicate our understanding of the qualifier

'properly', we will describe three approaches to teaching spirituality, noting the different contexts and purposes of each and illustrating with our own settings.

*Perspective I: Teaching the spirituality*

This perspective assumes that spirituality is essentially a self-implicating discipline. Taking this axiom to its logical conclusion, it follows that teachers of spirituality need to have been personally influenced by any spirituality they might teach, for to do otherwise would be to try to convey to someone something they do not truly know. In this perspective, teaching spirituality is a process of conveying to another a life-style, a character, a shaping of a soul. It is more a process of nurturing formation than delivering information. The teacher is more like a mentor on the spiritual way, a spiritual guide who must have been steeped in the spirituality taught, so that the student may also be formed in that way as carefully and accurately as possible. To try to teach a spirituality not engaged by the teacher is to dishonour those who truly engage it and to cheapen the spirituality itself, changing a banquet to gruel.

Imagine, for example, a situation in which the history of Ignatian spirituality is at issue. According to this first perspective, the teacher may begin by having the students make the Spiritual Exercises prior to any further exploration of Ignatian spirituality or its history. Following this immersion into the experience of Ignatian spirituality, comes an explication of primary sources, including, in this case, the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius' autobiography, and the early directories, the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Ignatius' letters, as appropriate. A further experience of communal discernment might ground a study of the 'Deliberation of the First Fathers' in order to explore this aspect of communal decision-making as it appears in Ignatian spirituality. Appropriate secondary sources will be introduced along the way. Meanwhile, the students will be exploring their appropriation of this spirituality through individual conferences with the teacher or a spiritual director.

For contexts in which personal appropriation of a given spirituality is the primary goal, such personal immersion combined with careful study of sources is both appropriate and essential. The teacher in this perspective must have prior experience of this spirituality, recognized it as personally growth-producing and integrated it into her or his life at a deep level. In this perspective the student approaches the study of the spirituality not merely as an intellectual exercise, but as an encounter

with a living spirituality which is potentially life-transforming. This formative approach to Ignatian spirituality will be appropriate for students who wish to lead others through the Spiritual Exercises or who wish to join the Society of Jesus, or who simply find Ignatian spirituality particularly conducive to living a deep spiritual life.

*Perspective II: Teaching about a spirituality*

This perspective assumes that individuals must be free to choose the spirituality which best allows them to express and deepen their relationship with God. Taking this axiom to its logical conclusion suggests a different direction in the teaching of spirituality.

Teaching *about* a spirituality requires objective distance. Because spirituality has to do with the deepest dimensions of the individual, it is necessary for the teacher to offer as objective a stance as possible, allowing the student the freedom for intellectual and affective engagement if he or she chooses. Conveying information in this way allows an opportunity for the student's self-initiated transformation if he or she connects naturally with a particular spirituality. In fact, it is impossible to convey accurately a spirituality from the inside, since what one teaches will always be limited by one's particular experience, which may not closely reflect what many or most persons experience of this spirituality. Teaching a spirituality from the inside thus runs the danger of exaggerating its benefits (or detriments) based on the 'baggage' of the teacher's own life. Better, in this perspective, to describe the experience of others as they describe it, even in their own words, with as little interpretation as possible.

A university graduate-school course in the history of spirituality serves as an example of this perspective. Here various spiritualities are introduced through the texts and biographies of founders and important disciples. The texts and secondary readings are approached through the canons of contemporary scholarship, employing historical-critical textual and other appropriate methods. Students might be asked to perform such tasks as: compare and contrast various spiritualities based upon analytical categories, examine the philosophical underpinnings of a spirituality, or examine the socio-political environment in which a particular spirituality flourished, all with the point of preserving a measure of critical distance and objectivity. Guaranteed, as well, is the student's freedom to appropriate a given spirituality or not; whether a student does so is outside the goals of the instruction process.

Perspective I and perspective II represent two ends of a spectrum which perhaps seldom exist in such pure form. Unless the point of the

course is precisely to form students in a particular tradition (like catechesis or formation of members of religious orders) or unless it is required to present material objectively in a culture-and-traditions, history-of-religions, and/or phenomenology approach (due to separation of church and state, for example), a natural mixture of the two approaches seems most conducive to effective teaching of spirituality in many contexts.

*Perspective III: Teaching spirituality as sacred trust*

According to this perspective, the teacher is a steward with a sacred trust to be conveyed for the transformation of the student. The teacher offers this sacred trust, the spirituality being taught, with careful attention to how his or her students encounter it. Even if there is more than one spirituality being taught, the teacher asks students to engage each one, try it on, taste it, be touched and moved by those parts of it that meet them, notice what parts of it grate against them. The teacher may have little personal experience of the spirituality, may be steeped in it, or may feel some connection with pieces of it. In any case, humility is vital. In this perspective, teachers of spirituality have several responsibilities. They must admit that the description comes from 'outside' the spirituality or admit that it is described through the lens of a particular insider, and so is coloured by an individual experience of the spirituality. They must describe their own sense of engaging the spirituality, where it has met them personally, and invite students to explore it themselves. Finally, they must know their limits with respect to their understanding of what constitutes 'legitimate' spirituality, not trying to present that which falls into their personal realm of 'illegitimate' expressions of spirituality. To be unaware of these boundaries is to risk caricaturing the spirituality that the teacher unconsciously resists.

In our own context of a Presbyterian graduate school of ministry, we teach spirituality courses as a part of helping students develop the skills and sensibilities of ministers or spiritual directors within the Reformed context. One of us is a Presbyterian pastor, and the other is a Roman Catholic religious; thus one teaches, from within her spiritual tradition, students of another tradition. When we present a spirituality, it is within this particular context and with a particular purpose; ours is not the definitive word, but an invitation to students to explore a spirituality, encounter it, engage it to see what it has to offer them in their own life and context as ministers or spiritual directors.

The history of Christian spirituality course we teach in our certificate and degree programmes for spiritual directors serves as an example of

this approach. In that course we follow a three-stage learning process as we encourage students to explore ever more deeply a wide variety of spiritualities, from Origen to contemporary Christian feminism.

In the first stage of this learning process, we describe a particular spirituality and encourage discussion around the issues and questions the students raise. In our descriptions, we do not claim that our own spiritualities encompass the breadth of spirituality we are addressing. Nor do we attempt to form the students according to any of the spiritualities we present. Instead, we seek to characterize each spirituality in a way that honours it, allows it to speak for itself, allows the students to determine for themselves its potential strengths and weaknesses. In addition, we relate how aspects of these spiritualities may or may not connect with our own lives, thus revealing the biases that filter our descriptions of the spiritualities. Likewise, in the discussion following the description of a spirituality, we encourage the students to describe what aspects attract them, repel them, seem foreign or familiar to them, and are filtered by their own biases as they compare that spirituality to their own patterns of intimacy with God.

In the second stage of the learning process, the students engage in a 'spiritual exercise' derived from the spirituality being presented. For instance, in exploring Benedictine spirituality, the students take an hour of class time to enter into individual or group *lectio divina*. At the conclusion of this time, we invite them to reflect on what this experience showed them of their own spiritual lives as they encountered an aspect of Benedictine spirituality.

Finally, the students engage in spiritual direction with one another. We ask that each spiritual direction meeting explore the directee's experience of having entered into the 'spiritual exercise' of the spirituality being presented. By participating in these spiritual direction sessions as informed directees, directors and observers, students do not simply critique or embrace a particular spirituality. Instead, they deepen their encounter with another spirituality in ways that may challenge, affirm, expand, illuminate and transform their own. In addition, they come to discover for themselves new ways of looking for God's presence in spiritualities that are not their own. In short, this third stage of the learning process draws together elements of humility, critical distance, affective engagement, informed reflection, self-understanding and practical application crucial to the formation of the spiritual director.

We teach spirituality in another context as well, that of a graduate theological school which offers advanced research degrees. Here the

mixture of perspectives I and II takes a different form. If the object of the study of spirituality as an academic discipline is the spiritual life as experience, as Sandra Schneiders suggests,<sup>3</sup> then the experience of the spiritual life of Christians is the focus. A teacher in this setting may wish to evoke an experiential connection between the students and the object of study.

In a doctoral seminar on discernment, for example, we begin by asking students to share an experience of discernment from their own history. Without prior specification of a certain understanding or context of discernment, the students' selections of experiences to share generally offer a wide variety of understandings of discernment, both individual and corporate, various ecclesial settings, understandings of the goal of discernment and the role of the human person, conceptions of God, and a variety of processes employed. This experiential foundation then becomes a source of major questions, illustrations and comparison and contrast as the course proceeds.

The bulk of the course considers a variety of texts dealing with discernment, with each primary text studied in its context, employing the typical historical-critical methods. Constructive interpretation includes the appropriation of what is transformative and enlightening to the current situation,<sup>4</sup> and is further enriched by references to the students' wide-ranging experience of discernment. Students are sometimes surprised to find their experiences reflected in ancient texts, and are equally engaged by very foreign conceptions of the understanding of the divine and human roles in discernment, the contexts and processes employed. Ancient experiences and contemporary experiences interweave in a tapestry of otherness and sameness; students are confirmed and challenged by both the traditional and the contemporary. They clarify their unexamined assumptions as they meet a variety of conceptions of discernment throughout history and within the experience of their fellow students.

The graduate-school setting suggests, then, a blending of the elements of formation and information, inside and outside, objective distance and subjective appropriation that is different from that of a setting where preparation for ministry is uppermost. Here the stress is on information critically appropriated. The formative aspect appears in muted form as an invitation to be explicit about one's personal interest in and prior experience of the phenomenon being studied. The formative aspect also becomes visible as students allow their prior assumptions to be deconstructed through the critical study that is essential for transformative appropriation.

*Some caveats*

It would be tempting to regard one or other of these three perspectives as legitimate and the others as somehow deficient. That is not our intent in presenting them. Each has its appropriate context and goal. A religious formation community, a parish or diocesan school of spirituality, and a ministry degree programme all legitimately stress the formative aspects of the teaching of spirituality appropriate to the first perspective. Still, such programmes will need an appropriate dose of objective analysis in order to present accurately the spirituality they intend to convey. On the other hand, more research-oriented degree programmes will naturally lean towards a historical or phenomenological approach and away from explicit formative approaches. Yet these programmes, too, can benefit from maintaining a careful tension between the formative and informative aspects of the teaching of spirituality as they strive to stay true to the self-implicating nature of studying spirituality.

It would likewise be tempting to view the perspectives as if they corresponded to the Ricoeurian movement from 'first naïveté' (perspective I) to 'critical distance' (perspective II) to 'second naïveté' (perspective III).<sup>5</sup> But such a view misses the fact that each perspective can and must be approached from the transformed outlook of 'second naïveté'.<sup>6</sup> Without this transformation in the teacher, perspective I becomes an exercise in indoctrination, perspective II can fall prey to disembodied and passionless chronicling, and perspective III can succumb to unreflective eclecticism.

We cannot stress too much the importance of self-awareness with respect to one's own personal spirituality. Without this hard-won self-knowledge, no matter which perspective is employed in teaching spirituality, the teacher risks unconsciously projecting her or his experience of spirituality on the students, thereby limiting their God-given freedom of choice in this sacred dimension of human life. Likewise, when academic researchers are unaware of their own commitments to patterns of engaging with the Ultimate, they risk having those unexamined predilections inadvertently leak over into their research projects.

*The spirituality of the teacher*

As we have pondered the issues addressed above, we have begun to ask friends and colleagues what *they* believed to be the role of the teacher's spirituality. We have been especially curious about their years as students. Had the spiritualities of their teachers mattered? In the

midst of writing papers, taking lecture notes, chasing high marks, had they found the spiritualities of their teachers to be important or not, apparent or not, relevant or not? In answering our questions, one colleague, a professor of theology, described her sense that the teachers who most deeply influenced her, inspired her, were not necessarily the most brilliant or creative. Rather, they were the ones she might even call 'saintly', the ones who presented a genuine warmth and caring she took as an indication of a healthy spiritual life. Because of their depth of character, the information they conveyed took on creative power in her life, became transformative – even though others could have presented the topics with more accuracy, elegant subtlety, academic insight or intellectual acumen.

Our colleague was describing teachers of every type, not simply teachers of spirituality. But her description reflects our sense that, when all is said and done, the message cannot be separated from the medium, especially in passing on the sacred trust, the wisdom of graced living, which is the matter of spirituality. While sufficient informational knowledge is critical, it is not sufficient simply to impart correct information about a spirituality. Integrity must ground the life of the teacher of spirituality not only for the sake of the one teaching, but also for the sake of those taught.<sup>7</sup> The *person* of the teacher of spirituality, his or her graced integrity, functions as an icon, window to the holy. Through that iconic presence others may be led into their own experiences of the transforming mystery we call God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the recent series of articles in the journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality: Bernard McGinn, 'The letter and the spirit: spirituality as an academic discipline', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol 1, no 2 (Fall 1993), pp 3–9; Sandra Schneiders, 'Spirituality as an academic discipline: reflections from experience' in the same issue, pp 10–15; and Sandra Schneiders, 'A hermeneutical approach to the study of Christian spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol 2, no 1 (Spring 1994), pp 9–14.

<sup>2</sup> 'Preface to the series' in Bernard McGinn et al. (eds), *Christian spirituality Volume 1: Origen to the twelfth century* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Schneiders, 'Hermeneutical approach', p 9.

<sup>4</sup> Schneiders, 'Hermeneutical approach', p 13.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp 347–357.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie has provided an excellent example of the movement from this initial engagement through love of the subject to critical distance, and then to re-engagement in 'The cost of interpretation: sacred texts and ascetic practice in desert spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol 2, no 1 (Spring 1994), pp 21–24.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), s.v. 'Teaching' by Boniface Ramsey OP.