



Spirituality in Lutheran Perspective: Much to Offer, Much to Learn

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WHEN I TELL PEOPLE THAT I AM A LUTHERAN DOCTORAL STUDENT IN CHRISTIAN spirituality, I get a variety of responses. Catholics and other non-Lutherans tend to be pleased at my protestant presence in a program whose students are primarily Roman Catholic, applauding the diversity of thought and experience brought by me and my protestant colleagues. Lutherans, however, generally respond differently, in one of two ways.

The first, I do not often hear directly; I pick it up from people I don't know, people writing letters to editors of Lutheran journals, or those whose impression of my field I glean second- or third-hand. I call this the "Look Before You Leap" view; it seems to run, "What do we need all this spirituality nonsense for, anyway? It's

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To the recent Christian discussion of spirituality, Lutheranism offers a rich musical tradition, a realistic anthropology, and the centrality of grace. Lutherans can learn from other Christians the art of spiritual discernment and a fuller place for sanctification and the contemplative life.

un-Lutheran, unorthodox, and unnecessary.” Often with good reason, this view finds the whole common notion of “spirituality”¹ to be vaguely or actually heretical, fluffy (it probably doesn’t help that my particular graduate program is located in Berkeley), and suspiciously tainted by new-age trendiness or neo-gnostic spiritualizing or uncritical relativism, having little if anything to do with the gospel of Jesus. These folks fear, I think, that talk of spirituality threatens to blur the boundaries between truth and untruth, between the word of God and the inchoate or even sinful human impulses, desires, and longings that such “spirituality” seems to enshrine as somehow in themselves revelatory.

The other Lutheran response comes to me more directly. This is the view I call “Lutherans Come Lately”; it runs something like, “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that Lutherans are finally starting to learn something about spirituality! We’ve been out of it for so long, especially in comparison with _____ [here fill in the person’s favorite ideal group: Catholics, Anglicans, charismatics, Buddhists, etc.]” This second view takes an opposite position to the first, seeming to believe that “real spirituality” is (almost by definition) found somewhere other than within Lutheranism as it currently exists: Lutherans have to go elsewhere to find and bring back the spiritual nourishment for which the ELCA and the culture at large are presently starving.

Of course there is truth in both positions. The Look-Before-You-Leap view reminds us, in the face of a lot of loose, fuzzy talk about spirituality, of the absolute centrality of the word of God (in all forms, but primarily that of Jesus Christ himself). As faithful Christians we do need to be critical and thoughtful about our approach to this super-trendy world. And the Lutherans-Come-Lately perspective reminds us that we have a great deal to learn from other Christian and non-Christian traditions. We don’t have the whole truth or the whole Jesus to ourselves; in fact, there is a great deal of precedent within Lutheranism itself for the necessity of reclaiming aspects of authentic Christian faith and practice that have been lost or muddled in present and past generations.

Yet neither of these perspectives does justice to the complex, living tradition that is Lutheran and Christian spirituality. We must first work to gain some clarity in regard to this indeterminate reality called “spirituality.” Following an outline of various definitional frameworks, I will then offer some thoughts on Lutheran spirituality that will attempt to take seriously the truth in both of the above positions, while simultaneously stretching each.

I will bracket the question of whether we ought to resist the trend toward speaking of spirituality at all, in deference to more traditional Lutheran terms such as devotion or piety. As we shall see, there are problems associated with using

¹The term “spirituality” is notoriously difficult to define precisely, yet its definition is obviously a key part of coming to some clarity about one’s position towards it. Later in this essay I will offer some reflections to aid in this process; at this point, however, the quotation marks indicate that the term is being used in an intentionally blurry way. Note also that I am obviously portraying these two positions in ways that verge on caricature; I do not intend to imply that any particular person necessarily would state their position as I have portrayed it.

“spirituality” as the primary term to describe this reality; yet, despite its inevitable flaws, the term has a rich—and salvageable—history; it is here to stay in the church and the culture at large. Rather than avoiding the term, then, Lutherans ought instead to think through their position on the subject in order to be able to enter and contribute to that vital conversation.

I. WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

The term “spirituality” translates the Latin *spiritualitas*, a noun derived in the fifth century from the New Testament adjective *pneumatikos*, or “spiritual.” Within Pauline anthropology flesh and spirit (*sarx* and *pneuma*) do not refer to a body/soul dualism but, respectively, to life apart from or life rooted in the living Spirit of Jesus Christ. The term *spiritualitas* similarly originates as a noun describing the quality or shape of a Christian life in its entirety formed by the Holy Spirit. Over the centuries, however, the term gradually took on a world-denying, dualistic flavor, as a definition from seventeenth-century France makes clear: by that point in history, spirituality had come to mean “everything connected with the interior exercises of the soul free of the senses which seeks only to be perfected in the eyes of God.”² In this century, the term has enjoyed a renaissance of popularity, beginning with French Catholic scholars in the early 1900s and spreading to U.S. Catholic circles and more recently to broader Christian and even non-Christian arenas. As Catholic understandings of the ideal Christian life have been fundamentally rethought in modern times, away from earlier interiorized notions of a world-shunning ascent to perfection, so also the term “spirituality” in its contemporary Christian understanding reflects a much more world-, laity-, and body-embracing reality—in effect, a return to the original Pauline orientation of the term.

This simplified history demonstrates the biblical and Christian origins of the term spirituality, as well as the origins of much of the suspicion some Lutherans and others may have of a term which later came to connote an excessively introspective and neo-Platonic piety. Scholars presently debate the actual nature of this reality and tend to take one of three approaches to its study.³ Some see Christian spirituality as primarily a sub-discipline of theology, i.e., the necessary experiential or lived component of Christian doctrine and truth; this is known as the “theological” approach to the field.⁴ Others assert that Christian spirituality is a particular

²Cf. Jean Leclercq, “*Spiritualitas*,” *Studia medievalia* 3a (1961) 6; cited in Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1 (Fall 1993) 3. This essay by McGinn provides an overview of the history and present debate over the term spirituality as well as an exhaustive bibliography of key secondary texts for those interested in pursuing this matter in more depth (see especially pp. 1, 3-9).

³Cf. McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit,” and Sandra Schneiders, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline: Reflections from Experience,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1 (Fall 1993) 10-15.

⁴Bradley Hanson is an excellent proponent of this position, bringing also a Lutheran perspective to the published debate. See his essays, “Spirituality as Spiritual Theology,” in *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*, ed. Bradley C. Hanson (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990) 45-51; and “Theological Approaches to Spirituality: A Lutheran Perspective,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2 (Spring 1994) 5-8. Some scholars taking this approach prefer to speak of “spiritual theology” rather than spirituality.

manifestation, among many others, of a broadly human phenomenon, namely the capacity inherent in every human being for connection to the Ultimate, however a particular individual or group may describe that Ultimacy. These scholars define spirituality as part of human nature itself (the “anthropological” approach⁵), rather than as a function primarily of the Christian revelation. And still other scholars tend to treat spirituality as an historical phenomenon (the “historical/contextual” approach), examining the concrete manifestations of particular belief systems as found in texts, individual lives, groups, or social movements in history.

Part of the confusion that pastors and laity sometimes experience as they try to make sense of spirituality may derive from this multiplicity of ways in which even “experts” use the term. Yet all three approaches are necessary for us as Christians. The theological approach reminds us that any genuine spirituality within our tradition is not merely an aspect of our humanity but has divine origin, flowing from the Holy Spirit and functioning to incorporate and shape us into Jesus’ own body through word and sacraments; we remember that we cannot “by [our] own reason or strength...believe in Jesus Christ [our] Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called [us] through the Gospel.”⁶ From another direction, however, the anthropological approach invites us not to stop at our own doors but to look toward those presently outside our communion. This approach considers the broad, vast, and varied human longings for authenticity and for God not as something alien or derivative, but as themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit within our shared and created humanity. This opens the conversation between ourselves and others. Finally, the historical approach encourages us to understand our own and others’ spirituality as these are shaped in powerful and subtle ways within the particular context and time in which people live.

II. WHAT IS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

One thing is clear: regardless of how one understands “spirituality” as a broad phenomenon, it is both possible and helpful to continue the discussion within more narrowly Christian terms. Just as my own doctoral program is not, despite how others may think of it or refer to it, in “spirituality” but in “Christian spirituality,” so too one may find more clarity in this debate by narrowing the focus to Christian (or even Lutheran, or Baptist, or Quaker, or fundamentalist) spirituality. At this point one does not have to worry that crystals or psychic readings or other components of some contemporary “spirituality” will contaminate us if we open the door to spirituality, because such phenomena are not found

⁵Sandra Schneiders, who first coined the reference to the “anthropological” approach to the study of spirituality, describes her view in the article cited in note 3. Since its publication, she has changed her name for this approach, preferring now to refer to it as the “hermeneutical” perspective. See Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2 (Spring 1994) 9-14. However, because the earlier term seems to me more readily understandable in this context, I am retaining it here.

⁶Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.

in Christian life and practice, and their intellectual presuppositions conflict with Christian teaching; thus by definition they are not part of Christian spirituality. After all, the theological aspect of the study of spirituality ensures that not everything goes, even (and especially) within this realm of power and mystery in human life. This addresses the fears of those who endorse the Look-Before-You-Leap view: spirituality is *not* necessarily pagan or gnostic; it is a powerful realm of Christian life and experience. Ignorance or fear of this central dimension of Christian life does not protect us from heresy. Rather, it hinders us and those in our care from fully experiencing and embodying the life of Jesus Christ to which the Spirit of God continually calls, creates, and redeems us. Provided that they do not violate Christian truth (a key caveat), there is no reason why we cannot appropriate practices such as spiritual direction, meditation, or prayer techniques from other Christian traditions or even from non-Christian spiritual traditions.

Given this overarching framework within which we might faithfully approach the often confusing world of spirituality, what exactly does this term describe and hope to understand? My own definition of Christian spirituality runs something like this: *spirituality is the world-encompassing and life-transforming action of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ in the life of a person or community, and her/his/their experience of and response to that action of God.*⁷ In distinction from those Lutherans-Come-Lately folks who think “real” spirituality is primarily to be found in other traditions, I would respond that my goal is primarily to explore, evaluate, and celebrate what the Lutheran tradition itself experiences as this “world-encompassing and life-transforming action” of God in human life. I do this partly for Lutherans, to help them claim and deepen their own spirituality as Lutherans and as Christians (on all four levels—see note 7); and partly for non-Lutheran Christians, to help contribute this important living voice to the broader conversation on the riches of Christian spirituality as a whole.

⁷Another aspect of the confusion surrounding the term “spirituality” comes from the fact that the same term refers to multiple levels of abstraction. It refers most primally to the “raw” existential level of human religious *experience* (in the case of Christians, experience of God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit). The second level to which the term refers is that of the person’s or community’s *response* to this experience of the divine, expressed in such ways as lifestyle, actions, or worldview, as well as through spoken or written words, artistic creations, ritual, etc. The third way in which the term “spirituality” is used is to refer to the *study* of the “first-level” human or Christian spiritual experience by means of “second-level” texts, artworks, etc., as well as by means of a variety of contemporary disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, cultural and gender studies, etc. Finally, because of the very nature of the discipline, such study tends to draw the scholar into some level of personal *engagement* with the Spirit in and through (or in reaction to) the spirituality being studied; thus this fourth stage itself feeds back into “first-level” experience, this time on the part of the scholar him- or herself and those to whom this scholarship is directed. Thus the first portion of this article laying out the various approaches to the study of spirituality operates on the third level, while my definition and the latter portion of the article move into the more experiential first and second levels. See Walter Principe, “Spirituality, Christian,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 932-38, for the basic framework which I have somewhat modified here.

III. WHAT IS LUTHERAN SPIRITUALITY?

As the title of this article indicates, I would assert that Lutherans have much to offer. In particular, I will highlight three areas in which Lutherans can make important contributions to the study of Christian spirituality. First, Lutherans can explore from within their rich and living tradition the role of music and hymns in conveying the very presence and reality of Christ; such study might involve the integration of many disciplines—ritual studies, music theory, philosophical aesthetics, physiology/neurology, poetics, etc.—to help illumine a key aspect of what is in many ways an aural tradition of spirituality.

Second, Lutherans offer an anthropology which can critique the sometimes overly optimistic views of human nature some other traditions employ. The Lutheran *simul* reminds us all that it is unwise to rely on our own impulses, emotions, and desires as infallible sources of revelation—that no aspect of our selves, but only the word of God, is ever going to be intrinsically and ultimately reliable. This realization can allow pastors and spiritual directors the freedom to challenge (and not only uncritically to bless), to allow the Spirit to guide people ever back to the reality and power of Jesus Christ who alone norms our lives and makes us saints.

Third, Lutherans can offer other Christians the centrality of grace which is a theological hallmark of this tradition; in the realm of spirituality, this emphasis has the effect of challenging all those spiritualities that seem to rely on human effort, “ascent,” and specific disciplines as a condition for growth in the spiritual life. This insistence on the prior and continuing efficacy of grace in the process of sanctification itself allows Lutheran Christians to explore forms of spirituality marked by freedom rather than any pre-set rules—to “exegete” and practice forms of prayer and life based on the hermeneutical principle of *was Christum treibet* (that which conveys Christ) in the individual, church, and world. As Luther experienced, such evangelical freedom liberates people to leave behind disciplines aimed at unending self-improvement and enter by grace the joyful and risky life of Christ himself in ways that do not have to continue earlier patterns but may reshape or even replace them.

These are just three of the areas in which Lutherans have a necessary and creative voice to offer Christian spirituality as a whole. Lutherans, I believe, impoverish the whole church if we withdraw from this conversation, whether because of suspicion or because of our hesitancy about the relative value of our spirituality compared with that of others. But as the Lutherans-Come-Lately voice reminds us, we can also learn. Again, I will suggest three areas in which Lutherans might hope to learn from others, as humble recipients of the Spirit’s wisdom in other Christian traditions. Like those preceding, these are not meant to be a complete listing.

First, I believe that Lutherans can benefit from immersion in traditions exploring the complex art of spiritual discernment, which stands near the heart of contemporary spiritual direction. Of course, skilled Lutheran pastors and leaders have always offered people such sensitive guidance into the movement of the Holy

Spirit in their lives and world; this is not new. But they have often done so without benefit of the considerable wisdom developed by other traditions (such as the Ignatian), which have for centuries intentionally trained people in the skills and nuances of such discernment, a key element of any Christian's faithful and ongoing vocational life in a complex world.

Second, I believe that Lutherans can learn from others to speak of sanctification—or even transformation—in Christian life. Because of the Lutheran emphasis on *simul*, many hesitate to affirm such a possibility because it implies a sort of “progress” in holiness that is ruled out under this anthropology. Of course, we never stop being sinners, radically dependent on the grace of God throughout our lives, no matter how holy we may ever appear; yet fear of blunting the radical edge of justification has perhaps kept us from exploring more fully how God's grace truly does act in us and the world toward real transformation. Scripture and Christian tradition—even Lutheran tradition—testify unmistakably to the real, transformative power of the risen Lord, alive and active in each Christian and in all the various levels of Christian community. Are Lutherans, in the name of grace, to be mere bystanders to this dynamic process, choosing spiritual complacency over the risky, dangerous, exhilarating process of allowing God to work the new creation even in ourselves and in our world? Rather than fearing that such emphases will threaten our necessary, unending reliance on grace, why not develop a spirituality of sanctification by grace? Spiritual disciplines; deepening prayer; growth in faith, hope, and love; joy experienced in weakness, failure, and suffering; passion for justice for the least; the lifelong task of becoming a little Christ to our neighbor—these are not our own works, but are the fruit of the Spirit given to us in Holy Baptism, gifts of God's own reign present now, proleptically and transformingly.

Finally, I would invite Lutherans to reconsider their traditional suspicion of the contemplative life as a Christian vocation. Understandably, Luther excoriated the monastic world of his day because of its corruption, elitism, and reliance on a self-limited spirituality “ascending” toward “perfection.” Yet times change, and our context today is very different from Luther's, with very different needs. While treasuring the truth of the gospel Luther experienced and taught, Lutherans might well today be led not only to rethink the place of contemplative vocations within the contemporary church, but even to explore together new and creative ways in which those called to such ministry might best serve the whole church and the world. Certainly the longing for such grace-full invitation into the life of prayer (at whatever level) is present in church and culture, as well as the need for deeply prayerful houses of hospitality to which busy Christians and seekers may retreat. Is there a place for a contemporary, and truly Lutheran, ministry of prayer and contemplation as vocation?

At the center of all Christian spirituality is the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ, who continues to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the whole church and each Christian. Called and gathered Christians will continue their own personal and professional explorations in this powerful, numinous arena of Christian faith. Jesus promises us that the Spirit of truth will guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

With firm, discerning, and joyful reliance on this ever-surprising and ever-faithful Spirit, we trust that we will not be led into untruth, however unfamiliar some of these new ways may appear. Along with Christians of many traditions, and indeed with all those on earth in whom God is ever working in mysterious ways, we continue to have much to offer and much to learn—together. ☩