



## **Spirituality Speaks; Theology Listens: New Beginnings for Respectful Dialog**

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In this relatively short space I hope to do at least two things: to reflect on the fact and implications of a new relationship between two aspects of the Christian community which have been in tension for some time; and to suggest a further agenda for those who participate in the communal structures of our Christian heritage. In doing so I am making a number of assumptions: that a closer, more dialogic relationship between the thinking and living functions in the community is desirable; that a greater degree of clarity on why the tension exists will be welcome; and that there is some need for a sense of “agenda” to set priorities for our future action.

### I. UNDERSTANDINGS OF TERMS

*Spirituality.* Spirituality is a word used to cover a great many possible components, some of them in ambiguous relationship with others. In my usage, “spirituality” refers to the life project of growth toward the transcendent/immanent God that is intrinsic to human being. This may be reflective awareness or non-reflective and unaware; it may be thematic (finding words) or unthematic (wordless yearning); it may be well developed or still a potential, but it is there where you have human being. The language of “call” seems not to be helpful in understanding what is meant by spirituality, for call and election carry connotations of an external, arbitrary word. I take spirituality to be a response to the transcendent God, not as external, but God experienced as immanence. More useful than the language of duty is the language of intentionality. Spirituality is an *intentionality* of human being, an intending of that being which is more ontological than willed, an intending of human being by the energy of Holy Spirit toward its fullest development. For a person who has become reflectively aware of Christ as the central symbol which gives meaning to all of human life and destiny, that spirituality will have a Christic character. Some of the characteristics that I would name as constitutive of Christian spirituality are the following.

It is *sacramental* (wholistic, if you prefer). It participates in the dialectic of the sacred. By this I mean that the divine reality is known and loved in, with, and through the material, bodily, and historical realities of human life. Christian spirituality is a contradiction in terms if it is purported to be immaterialistic, dualistic, a-historical, and anti-body.

It is *communal*. It seeks, in the same act in which it receives from God through others, to give back to others. Its memory of God’s gracious action and presence is a communal memory. One could even say that its value for the solidarity and unity of the human community provides

the best test case for measuring the individual's growth toward authentic union with God.

It is *feminist*. Feminism is defined simply as the affirmation of the full humanity of women. Christ's good news was that his followers would be empowered by their recognition of his Father to transcend the human and social status quo. An order that had regarded some individuals as inferior to others or the property of others gave way to a new order in which all were not servants but friends. There is ample evidence that in today's world as well, one's growth toward God and toward interdependence within the human community depends on giving up the fictions of superiority shored up with structures that enable individuals to dominate others on the basis of gender, color, or class. The condition for discipleship is to forego this kind of power to dominate which hierarchical status bestows.

It is *eschatological*. By that I mean that conscious existence as a Christian actively intends a future. In religious terms that future is the reign of God; in existential terms, it is a world of justice, peace, and mutuality. It intends such a future unambiguously, even as it lives in the midst of sin and oppression and even as it responds to infinite love and promise with finite capacity and damaged faith and hope. Any spirituality which attempts to escape the tension between the poles of the "already" and the "not yet" fails to live in the real present. This is a present where God is already incarnate, but where human being is not yet finished in its journey toward "divinization," as Augustine and many of the early Fathers and medieval Mothers would say. Any spirituality which has abandoned the "scandal of Christianity"—that is, that the transcendent God is present and active here and now, mediated through the actions and passions of ordinary women and men—has either absolutized the here and now or despaired of reality in favor of a utopian dream.

*Theology*. Theology, in the sense I use it in this essay, is an intellectual discipline with appropriate though not necessarily unique methodology, content, and history. As a discipline it can be learned and therefore presumably taught. It has been associated with the academy since the days when Greek "lovers of wisdom" undertook systematic critiques of the mythology of the gods and goddesses. A common and useful way of defining theology is to see its purpose as the systematic consideration of all things in their relationship to God. There are two presuppositions at work here: the presumption of faith (all things are in relation to God who is), and the presumption of reason (human beings can find and articulate these relationships in such away that they carry the authority of objective and universal statements). In doing theology well one enters into a circle of interpretation of experience and texts which becomes a task

of formulation and translation into language and culture. Further, it is related to the process of transformation of persons in that it becomes both a respondent and source of action. While theology is precisely an intellectual function, in the human being the intellectual faculty cannot be separated, but only distinguished, from the other human capacities. This point is made increasingly by feminist thinkers who call for a "sensuous rationality" as a human mode of perceiving and expressing truth. Moreover, theology is not an intellectual function carried on for its own sake, but is within the experience of and at the service of the community. One might say that, at best, the interdependence between theologian and community is an exercise of mutual critique and inspiration. The thinker about God depends on the lived faith of the community, that is, the insight that members of the community have into their action in relation to the common

meaning they share and celebrate. The theologian also depends on the reasoned discourse about that faith that exists prior to his or her engagement with it. It is to be accepted, but not without question, for part of the theologian's task is to challenge the gaps and inconsistencies between the faith's proclamation and its practice, its texts and structures, its purporting to be "good news" in the face of negative effects for real people. Finally, in concert with persons and events which shed new light on the texts or give new vitality and unity to the community, the theologian is charged with constructing new "models of possibility" for proclaiming and living the Good News that God is *with-us*.

A number of contrasts between spirituality and theology suggest themselves. To note them briefly may help to define more simply their differences.

Spirituality is how Christians live their faith; theology is how Christians think about/talk about their beliefs.

Spirituality aims for personal growth in what is most unique to humans—knowing and loving what is knowable and lovable; theology aims for clarity and universality (though not immutability) in its statements about what we know and love.

Spirituality engages the whole person; theology engages the person's "sensuous rationality."

Spirituality is the experience of faith that provides raw material for theology; theology is the product and process of reflection on faith that makes it communicable.

Spirituality is the vocation of all by virtue of their humanity; theology is the task of some in terms of their gifts, opportunities, and the needs of the community.

Spirituality seeks direct experience of ultimate reality; theology seeks to understand religious experience usually mediated through texts.

Without spirituality, theology can forget that God is mystery; without theology, spirituality can forget that God is incarnate.

## II. THE FACT OF THE TENSION

Had understandings of these relationships always been accepted as harmoniously as here described there would not necessarily have been cause for

tension. Obviously, when viewed theoretically, both are necessary to a community charged with proclaiming, actualizing, and celebrating the mystery of grace in history. When viewed practically both are necessary, each for the life of the other, and both for the community. Without the Spirit and the Word we could not effectively "remember" all the things God makes known to us.

In the earliest church the "spiritual person" was one in whom the Spirit of Christ dwelt and expressed itself in gifts of power (1 Cor 12:1; Col 1:9). One recognized the Spirit in part by the wonderful and strange things that came unexpectedly from human beings. It is not difficult to see how a cultivation of "spirituality" could have emerged that came to view it as the privilege of an elite and the prerogative of the specially chosen. When, some centuries later, the terms "spirit" and "spiritual" were used in contrast to "matter" and "material," one can see the potential for another source of tension, this time between those presumably engaged in mental, otherworldly pursuits and those locked into ordinary, material, this-worldly obligations. As a method of

talking about God's relationship to the world developed that was more systematic and self-conscious than its earlier life-oriented commentaries on the Sacred Pages, the term spirituality came to be used to identify the interior, affective life, especially in opposition to the public, academic, and philosophical turn of the theologians. Negative as well as positive meanings became attached to the term in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when apparently excessive forms of enthusiasm and quietism, not to mention sometimes frightening and neurotic kinds of asceticism and mysticism were called into question by the beginnings of a whole new way of speaking about reality. Theology, in its aspirations to be considered a "science" (if not queen of the sciences), needed to disassociate itself from the more flagrant forms of spiritual allegations.

The tension accumulated as a result of the tendency to distortion of each of these ways of expressing the faith. Tendencies—which became self-caricatures—of spirituality to foster elitism, anti-institutionalism, escapism from history, body, and sexuality, individual piousness, anti-intellectual indulgence in sentimentality, and excessive display were evident at different periods in Christian history. Now that the history of spirituality is being filled out with the publication of less-well-known voices (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen, Mary Magdalen de Pazzi), it is easier to document its low as well as its high points. A comparable tendency of theology to parochialism, authoritarianism, legalism, verbalism, irrelevance to communal life, abstraction, and analysis separated from imagination and synthesis became characteristic of certain schools and periods. The problematic involved in a theology that was less critical than it should have been of its own distortions and abuses remains with us to this day. In some academic settings the term "theology" is foregone in favor of "religion" and "religious studies" because there is still little ability to distinguish its authentic forms from its caricatures. Continuity with Christian theology and spirituality of the past, in my view, remains essential, and that continuity assumes the ability to distinguish between an authentic form and its distortions.

It is my understanding that when either of these lost its balance and perspective, it occasioned overcompensation in the other aspect of the community's religious life. For example, when theology was most separated from

the liturgical and devotional experience of the people and it removed itself into the ivory tower of its own speculations, then spirituality can be found to accommodate emotional needs to a disproportionate degree.

### III. THE FACT OF A NEW DIALOG

Could the opposite be true as well? A new respect and dialog have emerged between practitioners of spiritual art and theological science. One of the reasons may be that each has, at least as this participant sees it, found better balance and a broader integration of their functional specialty into the life of the community. In many ways both theology and spirituality are new disciplines, in continuity with earlier forms but transformed in important ways: spirituality is existential *and* reflective; theology is conceptual *and* experiential. It is not necessary here to prove this observation as a fact nor find verification for the reasons to account for such a development. Speculations abound: increased participation by laity, especially women, have led to a need to know and a desire for growth; a crisis of meaning and morals has sent those in

ministry and policy making to search deeper into available resources; a consensus against dualism in the best of our social science literature has led to the identification and rejection of many other false dichotomies; a consensus for social responsibility and political engagement among the major religions has shown the close relationship between thinking and acting, and has diminished forever the gaps between town, gown, and sanctuary; and increased education and communication in all segments of Western society has opened to those previously ineligible the borders to many special roles and functions. A simple fact with which to start is the renewed interest in *both* theology and spirituality in our day, and often by the same individuals. And for me, the most important consideration to explore is what this dialog means. What are theology and spirituality saying to each other within the hearing of the community?

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS

Of the many possible implications one could formulate, I will address here only three ideas: common need, common use of experience, and a new kind of ministry being created out of this dialog.

1. Once a dialog has begun, both participants are needed to continue the elaboration of meanings as well as the progress of the relationship to what-has-not-yet-been-seen. It is no longer acceptable, if it ever was, to choose between theology and spirituality, or as the older distortions suggested, between the head and the heart. As the self-understanding of the Christian community continues to grow—to our pain as well as our joy—the insight is unmistakable: the *body* is superior to either head or heart. With discernment, we attempt to keep both vitality and order in that body. Occasionally corrective action will emphasize the importance of a special function, but it is clear that this does not imply permanent or innate superiority. The purpose of dialog is to keep the body (the community) functioning as faithful disciple.

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2. Spirituality and theology have discovered in this initial dialog that they both work from and need experience. They both go through a cycle of reflecting on that experience in the light of our times and remembering the normative scriptural witness. They both move persons to transformative action. At the very least, each individual participates by generating the raw data for consideration in both ways: how do we grow toward God, and how do we formulate in our time what it means for *us* to believe? In what I think is a new way, every consciously committed Christian is engaged, whether professionally or not, in the writing of the spirituality and theology that will stand as our generation's contribution to the Good News.

3. The dialog has shown with new imagery and urgency that members of the community need each other to be mentors, sponsors, and friends, that is, to help each of us, and hence all of us, to avoid the distortions that come from falling into excess or defect in living our faith in a complicated time. This is no less than a new ministry in which "friendship" is the content and self-knowledge is the gift bestowed by the mediation of the friend. Aspects of this ministry are present throughout the tradition. It has characteristics of the shepherd/pastor, the spiritual director, the teacher, the confirmation sponsor, and the corporate mentor. But the somewhat newer insight is that my sensitivity, understanding, and growth as a good theologian for the community can be heightened by someone who can call me to account, with mutual respect and reciprocal love. Moreover, attempting to live the Christian life in the most ordinary ways, with no

pretensions to objective formulation or universal applicability, still involves a person in a responsibility to find ways to make his or her experience known with those charged with policy making for the community. Taking initiative to contribute one's own energy to the cycle of experience, reflection, formulation, and action is the task of all; most need support and encouragement to continue to carry, much less accept, such responsibility.

We have, therefore, these three: spirituality, theology, and community, and the greatest of these is...! Spirituality which calls word to life? Theology which calls life to word? As in the word of Jesus, the question of greatness is a false question unless asked in terms of the dialog: the desire to be in service, each to the other.

## V. AN AGENDA FOR THE COMMUNITY

Of course, the community is not some abstract global church, but it is the local community. And of course each local community needs to read the signs of the times in its own sphere and discern its priorities and how to implement them. So each community must set its own agenda. I would speak here only in exemplary fashion to suggest what might be some strategies, which taken, might advance the dialog and do what relationships do best—contribute to the transformation of the community toward more honest, more loving, more mutual activity.

1. All teachers and students of theology need to be students of spirituality and vice versa. Spirituality as the “formation” aspect of theology and ministry has been a major component only of seminary education. Even there it is in many cases distorted by depending too heavily on past male experience and

symbolization. The spirituality of the seminaries, a necessity for ministry, can be made more whole by incorporating reflection on female experience. Equally important, the theology of the university and college setting must make respectful room for spirituality.

2. As theology struggled for and won its recognized status as a liberal art as well as an objective scientific discipline, so the study of spirituality is challenged to do the same. One would hope that religion and theology departments would assist rather than deter this process. One of the ironies of academic structure is that departments of religious studies may be more open than theology departments to a relatively “new” discipline. They have, after all, already recognized the pluralism of material and methodologies that can characterize authentic ways of reflecting on a community's faith experience.

3. Students in undergraduate programs are calling for assistance to plan rigorous major programs of study in spirituality. Special individualized majors will have to be provided where there are no structured departmental majors. This ought to be done not just for the sake of the students and their interest and aptitude for the subject matter, but for the development of the discipline itself.

4. Spirituality programs which have insufficient intellectual rigor or content should be assisted to improve the quality and depth of their work. The abuses and dangers of insufficient knowledge and intelligence in a subject area of ultimate concern are well known to all observant persons.

5. Reconceptualizing Christian religious education programs for children becomes necessary when one is attuned to the dialog between theology and spirituality. It is not enough to

have “sacramental preparation” programs as occasions for catechetical training. The many stages of growth and passages characteristic of a contemporary life make it clear that two or even six such occasions are insufficient to enable and celebrate the progression in that life.

6. The vocation of friend needs to be recovered as the root and anchor of community based ministry. This is not a luxury today as it would be in a society characterized by extensive family support systems and social networks; it is a necessity born of individualism and personal isolation.

These three, then, theology, spirituality, and community could be in service to each other in explicit and intentional ways that are just beginning to be imagined in the dialog. It is another opportunity to know with a sensuous rationality what we love with intelligence.