



Spirituality: What Is It?

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Within each of us there is a mystic yearning for union with God. We experience glimpses of the holy in our everyday lives and know that such mystery is of God. When we put into words such longings and experiences of mystery, we eventually speak of our spirituality or spiritual life.

Some months ago, when the editor asked me to write a general article on spirituality, I knew it would be a challenge. After struggling for some time with this question, it occurred to me that the question/reply format would probably be very appropriate since the word 'spirituality' raises many questions for Christians today, certainly more than can be answered. My hope is that you, the reader, will join in the question and the quest to come to a fuller understanding of your own spirituality.

What is meant by spirituality? This is a good question for our time and an important one, but how do you put into words what goes on between lovers? We struggle with a question like this because spirituality is not limited to our thinking function alone, but is primarily about the most intimate of our relationships; that is our relationship with God through Jesus the Christ. Every relationship is living, fluid, and dynamic and therefore defies a neat and tidy definition. There is some help and comfort from Augustine to a question like this when he said, "If you don't ask me, I know; if you ask me, I don't know!" Spirituality is that kind of question. We all have a sense of what we mean by the word but have a hard time clearly defining it. We attempt to answer this question with our heads while spirituality is primarily a matter of our hearts.

Is spirituality possible to define? Yes, if we keep in mind that any definition will be using words and language which, however accurate, are always limited. More than that, I think it is very important that we articulate what we mean by words we use, especially for such a central issue as spirituality. It needs to be stated from the outset that here we are talking about Christian spirituality, which is nothing more or less than the whole of one's Christian life. For the Christian there are potential problems with the word 'spirituality' because it can convey an idea of ethereal "spirits" or something other-worldly, unrelated to our day-to-day material lives. Christian spirituality is "profoundly organic," to use a phrase from Evelyn Underhill. Anything less than a profoundly organic spirituality is in danger of becoming a narrow, privatized piety that does not adequately reflect the rich heritage of Christian spirituality.

What, then, would be a working definition? Let me return to a view from Evelyn Underhill, an Anglican mystic and writer. She writes:

Our favourite distinction between the spiritual life and practical life is false. We

cannot divide them....For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His will.¹

She is neither the first nor the only Christian writer who uses the idea of God as our center and center of all that is, but she does help us to see that by spiritual life we mean a life *anchored* in God, and *soaked* in God's reality, *and* that God has a claim upon us.

Another view has been expressed by two Roman Catholics, Katherine Dyckman and Patrick Carroll, who have written a very significant book in the area of spirituality. Their book is *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet*, and the title itself conveys a good summary of Christian spirituality. They warn that:

Spirituality is not adequately described as building up my private relationship with God: a 'Jesus and I' mentality....Spirituality consists not in becoming more and more responsible in the fulfillment of a duty, but becoming more and more faithful in a love relationship. We focus more accurately if by spiritual we mean the human person under the influence, guidance, power, wisdom, love of the Holy Spirit.²

Mystic and prophet, inner and outer—these are all parts of one reality, one relationship between lover and beloved.

Finally, there is an oral tradition that I find very much to the point. Toward the end of an international meeting on the topic of spirituality the participants were sharing some of their own views that had emerged from the presentations and discussions. A pastor from a developing country gave this definition:

Spirituality is ordering our lives in such a way that the Holy Spirit has a chance.

That to me is a helpful way to understand spirituality in that we are invited to be intentional as to how we order our lives so that we attend to the great and persistent movements of God's Spirit in them.

Is it fair to say that within most Protestant churches there has not been much emphasis placed on spirituality? That is generally true. In fact, it seems that from some quarters of the Protestant tradition there is outright suspicion of anything associated with the mystical. I want to come back to this, but first I want to share a rabbinic tale about Eisik, son of Yekel in Cracow, that speaks to this:

After many years of great poverty, which had never shaken his faith in God, Rabbi Eisik dreamed someone bade him look for a treasure in Prague under the bridge which leads to the King's palace. When the dream recurred a third time, Rabbi Eisik prepared for the journey and set out for Prague. But the bridge was guarded day and night and he did not dare to start digging. Nevertheless, he went to the bridge every morning and kept walking

¹Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.) 35-36.

²Katherine M. Dyckman and L. Patrick Carroll, *Inviting The Mystic, Supporting The Prophet: An Introduction To Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 17-19.

around it until evening. Finally, the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked in a kindly way whether he was looking for something or waiting for somebody.

Rabbi Eisik told him of the dream which had brought him there from a faraway country. The captain laughed: “And so to please the dream, you poor fellow wore out your shoes to come here! As for having faith in dreams, if I had had it, I should have had to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Jew—Eisik, son of Yekel, that was the name! Eisik, son of Yekel! I can just imagine what it would be like, how I should have to try every house over there, where one half of the Jews are named Eisik, and the other half, Yekel!” And the captain laughed again.

Rabbi Eisik bowed, traveled home, dug up the treasure from under the stove, and built The House Of Prayer which is called ‘Reb Eisik’s Shul.’³

Like any good story it can stand by itself, but I cannot resist using it to draw some parallels for our consideration of spiritual life. I think that our culture, our times, and much of our life—including church life—is spiritually impoverished. We tend to grind along in our improvement while at the same time living in a house having an immensely rich but buried treasure. On the one hand, that may represent a pessimistic view of contemporary church and society; but at the same time I know that we can uncover that buried treasure within our own house. Like Rabbi Eisik, we need to listen carefully within and be willing to follow that inner direction as we journey.

A living example of that is a Baptist friend who lived near a Roman Catholic church. For a number of years she took time nearly every day to attend the early morning Mass. She was a faithful Baptist and still is; yet she found something attractive, peaceful, and satisfying by beginning her day with other Christians celebrating an ancient liturgical rite.

Within the whole Judeo-Christian tradition we have an extremely rich heritage of spiritual life that we have tended to ignore. To the extent we have neglected this great legacy, we have remained impoverished in our relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

We are seeing and hearing the word “spirituality” much more frequently. Does this represent a change in attitude? Yes, I think so. Again a change in attitude could imply a different way of thinking, but it is much more than that. I think many Christians are sensing a deep hunger within for something more. There are more and more people naming that hunger as a longing for deeper spiritual life—that is, deeper roots in their relationship with God, others, and themselves. They are naming the hunger while longing for the abundance.

I think it would be helpful at this point to introduce the witness of Baron Friedrich von Hugel to this whole question. Von Hugel was a Roman Catholic lay theologian who lived most of his life in Great Britain. He was a scholar, writer, and spiritual director for a number of his contemporaries, including Evelyn Underhill. Von Hugel identified three elements of religion that contribute to a balanced and healthy expression of Christian life. The three elements are: the

intellectual, the institutional, and the mystical. He is saying that full and abundant Christian life is a creative tension between these elements. Let us look

³This is said to be one of Martin Buber's favorite rabbinic tales. It is quoted by Ed Thornton, *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 111.

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at what he meant by each of these elements. The intellectual or scientific element refers to the appropriate use of our God-given intellect in religious life. This includes the scholarly disciplines of study and research, in short, the teaching ministry of the church. Without this, we are in danger of falling into superstitious religion and unable to witness effectively to each new generation. The institutional or historical element keeps us grounded in the historical revelation of our faith. We worship God who became flesh like ourselves in the historical person of Jesus the Christ. The Church is the institutional expression of that event and consists of flesh and blood humans called and sent to share God's good news through word and action. Finally, the mystical or emotional element speaks to the living relationship between God, the Lover, and God's people, the Beloved. We respond to this wonder by in turn loving and adoring God. Without this, we experience the restlessness that St. Augustine referred to when he prayed, "You created us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless 'til we rest in You." Von Hugel's contribution is to show us that we need each of the elements for a balanced and effective Christian life. If one element is dominant, aberrations occur. If one is neglected, impoverishment results.⁴

Now for Protestant Christianity in this century, I think the missing link has been the mystical element. We have excellent intellectual scholastic disciplines. We have managed to maintain an effective institutional witness which includes orderly administration, outreach, and service to the world. What we have largely ignored—and possibly even discredited—is the mystical/emotional element of religious life. Something that may immediately come to mind for many is an expression of Christianity based primarily on "emotionalism" and ungrounded enthusiasm—and that is not what von Hugel means by the mystical/emotional element of religion. Rather, he is pointing toward all that is part of any relationship between lover and beloved. There is no such relationship that can survive and thrive with only rational, intellectual information, however right and accurate, nor on a well-run institutional basis.

The biblical witness is full of descriptions of the lover/beloved relationship. Hosea, for instance, writing about Israel's infidelity as well as Gomer's, and speaking God's word to Israel says, "What I want from you is plain and clear: I want your constant love....I would rather have my people *know* me, than have them burn offerings to me" (6:5-6, TEV). Here we see a passionate expression of God's longing for people to know their maker.

In John's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches....Abide in me, and I in you....As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:4-5, 9). This is obviously more than an intellectual understanding of God's love. This is a loving relationship, a living and growing relationship; and this is the vital element of life we call the mystical. As noted earlier, the mystical certainly encompasses all aspects of our lives and leads us to responses of adoration, praise, and gratitude.

⁴A very fine discourse on von Hugel is given by the Quaker, Douglas V. Steele, *Together in Solitude* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 41-74.

Von Hugel's three elements can also be put in these terms: knowing God—using our intellect; loving God—in a mystical relationship of love and adoration; and serving God—in the world through the institutional structure of the church.

Prayer is often mentioned in connection with spirituality. Is that an important element? There is a European theologian and bishop who reduces Christian life to two essential marks: prayer and service. The two are always integral, with prayer being the knowing and loving, and service being our response.

It seems that each year some new material from the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer becomes available. We know of Bonhoeffer's gifts as a brilliant theologian and writer. We know of his social conscience and active resistance to the Third Reich, leading to his martyrdom. We know of his leadership in the Confessing Church. What we have not known much about until recently is Bonhoeffer the mystic and teacher of prayer. David Gracie has given the English reader a number of Bonhoeffer's thoughts and instructions in *Meditating on the Word*. A sampling:

Before our daily bread should be the daily word....The morning must yield an hour of quiet time for prayer and common devotion....And although we are often not 'in the mood' for it, such devotion is an obligatory service to the One who desires our praise and prayers.⁵

Put in other words, there exists a living relationship between God and ourselves; and that relationship needs nurturing, attention, and time, just as any other friendship does. More importantly, without that connection the relationship remains distant and formal, a knowing about God without knowing God as deeply as God desires. Bonhoeffer warns of the consequences of neglecting prayer, while affirming that it is part of the work of every Christian:

Whoever wants to carry out properly any fully developed spiritual office, without bringing both self and work to ruin by mere activism, must learn early on the spiritual discipline of the servant of Jesus Christ. Every Christian needs quiet time for prayer.⁶

Throughout this series of meditations and sermons, Bonhoeffer persistently calls upon Christians not to merely study the Word, but also to pray the Word through quiet reflection in God's presence. Such practice goes hand-in-hand with study and service. This newly translated material shows us that Bonhoeffer stood squarely in the tradition of other Christian theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and others who were also teachers of prayer. They all knew that prayer was a necessary part of Christian life and theology. Moreover, Bonhoeffer and others from our rich tradition show us that prayer, which has many facets, is a spiritual discipline that needs to be learned with the help of teachers and guides.

Is prayer important? Most certainly! Without it our vital connection with our Source and Savior is dry and shallow. One need only look at the example of Jesus, his words *and* his behavior, which showed a total reliance on the One he

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Word* (New York: Cowley, 1986) 39.

⁶*Ibid.*, 39.

knew as Father. Prayer is to spirituality what study is to theology; both are vital disciplines for Christian life, with each enhancing the other.

What are some steps that Christians could take toward spiritual growth or renewal? Here I would first refer to a definition of spiritual life used earlier, that is, to order our lives in such a way that the Holy Spirit has a chance. We do have choices as to what we do with our time; how we order our lives. The witness of many women and men from past and present is that we can intentionally choose to be open to the movement of God's Spirit within and around us—or we can choose to ignore it.

A word that I find appropriate and helpful here is “conversion,” which is a changing and turning. As Christians we are continually in the process of conversion, and our disciplined attention to that process is what we mean by spiritual growth. Obviously there is no one system that is right for everyone, but each Christian can find a path that satisfies his or her deepest hunger. Here is where Christian community is so crucial. We need each other, and we need help and direction from each other in finding that path. Thomas Merton once wrote that the most dangerous Christian is the contemplative who is not talking to anyone else. We need to listen attentively to God's voice within, but always in the context of Christian community. We have a rich heritage available to us and need to take steps to rediscover and reclaim that Treasure for which we all long.

In closing, I suggest one concrete step. I suggest that we simply *ask* God for the treasure our hearts desire. Ask and continue to ask. Some words from an eleventh century monk, Anselm of Canterbury, might assist our asking:

O Lord my God,
Teach my heart where and how to seek you,
Where and how to find you...

Teach me to seek you...
For I cannot seek you
unless you teach me
Or find you
Unless you show yourself to me.

Let me seek you in my desire,
Let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you,
Let me love you when I find you.⁷

⁷Partial quotation of Anselm's prayer from the book by Mark Link, *You, Prayer for Beginners and Those Who Have Forgotten How* (Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1976) 73.