

What Is Spirituality?

Modern interest in spirituality is big and growing. One needs only to enter a major bookstore to find a plethora of books devoted to the subject. These include works on religious doctrine, the new age movement, mysticism, self-help books, and many other subjects. Many are practical, dealing with such topics as how to pray, how to infuse marriage with religious meaning, or how to develop a twelve-step spirituality. Others are more exotic, promising wisdom from indigenous traditions or esoteric teachings from the East. Still others use the term “spirituality” quite loosely, applying it to such things as optimal golf games or wholesome business strategies. What seems clear from such titles and themes is that the term itself is very unclear. Even trained scholars struggle to agree on a definition. The famous Anglican theologian John Macquarrie considers that spirituality “has to do with becoming a person in the fullest sense.” Leading Protestant spirituality scholar Gordon Wakefield says that it “describes those attitudes, beliefs, and practices which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities.” And finally, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams speaks of “each believer making his or her own that engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith.”¹

Each of these definitions has problems. Macquarrie’s is a bit vague and assumes a modern bias toward flourishing in *all* dimensions of human life, whereas a number of traditional spiritualities would not see biological health as a necessary component. Regarding Wakefield’s definition, many spiritualities, such as Buddhist, might quarrel with the idea that spirituality must involve the pursuit of super-sensible realities. Even Williams’s definition can be faulted on the grounds that some persons’ “questioning” might be rather superficial.

1. John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 40; Gordon Wakefield, “Spirituality,” in *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 361; Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St. John of the Cross* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 1. See Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?” *Horizons* 13, no 2 (1986): 265–66.

Ewert Cousins, the general editor of the monumental series, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, after wrestling with the problem, finally settled on this definition: Spirituality is “that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions ‘the spirit.’ This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality.”² Cousins’s definition could be faulted for characterizing spirituality as something solely personal, with little attention to spiritual movements that focus on such goals as social justice or environmental responsibility.

Sandra Schneiders, a leader in the field of spirituality, argues that every spirituality has six analyzable components:

- An understanding of human nature and the human condition from a theological perspective.
- An ultimate horizon. Whether this ultimate horizon is God, union with God, or perhaps Nirvana, there is always something that represents a spirituality’s foundational concern or absolute value.
- A path to that ultimate horizon, a way of life or series of stages that helps aspirants attain the ultimate horizon.
- Typical experiences that represent advancement on the path.
- Integration of the person or community of persons that represents increasingly broad flourishing along the path.
- Specific values that are core and necessary to uphold and pursue.

Many scholars find this framework useful, both for exploring a particular spirituality and for comparing different spiritualities. In my doctoral dissertation, I used Schneiders’s strategy fruitfully to compare the spiritualities of sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross and fifth century Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa. Each of Schneiders’s categories helped me comprehensively map their respective understandings of the human person, the respective nature of union with God and Nirvana, how to proceed to that ultimate horizon, what one would typically expect as one proceeded along the path, the kinds of spiritual healing that corresponded to different stages of spiritual growth, and the key values one would have to maintain progress.

Schneiders’s account also helpfully exposes the limitations of some spiritualities. For example, twelve-step spiritualities, such as one might find in *Alcoholics Anonymous* and similar recovery models, often prove helpful in addressing addiction, but offer no real sense of who or what God is. Rather,

2. Ewert Cousins, “Preface,” in *Christian Spirituality*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (New York: Continuum, 1988), 1:xiii.

Spiritual but not Religious

Many Americans today say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Some who say this mean that they believe themselves spiritually attuned to God or transcendental principle in the universe, but are not members of a religious organization. Others mean that they are committed to specific spiritual practices, typically coming from a religious tradition, but are not formally members of that religion. Others mean that, although they do not participate in religious practices, neither do they consider themselves atheists. Scholars and religious leaders alike often recognize that the “spiritual but not religious” posture sometimes reflects a principled intellectual stance against religious dogma or institutional dysfunction. But the phrase is vague, and sometimes persons use it without actually thinking through what it means to be “spiritual but not religious.”

they imagine God only as “a higher power.” They also pursue no ultimate goal beyond recovering from addiction and assuming personal responsibility for one’s past behavior. Their understanding of the human condition is limited to the recognition of one’s powerlessness to resist addiction. In light of the six components, twelve-step recovery programs don’t embody a full-fledged spirituality, which involves the whole person in a comprehensive way or contains a clear agenda for pursuing transcendence.

Schneiders’s account, however, also has its limitations. Some spiritualities simply do not fit this model very well. Native American spiritualities, for example, do not lay out a clear path with well-defined stages of growth. Daoist and Shinto spiritualities do not have an ultimate horizon. And even the Ignatian spirituality from the Roman Catholic tradition does not seem to fit Schneiders’s account well, as explained in chapter 10.

Another helpful framing of the study of spirituality comes from Michael Buckley, who, together with Schneiders, started the first comprehensive doctoral program for spirituality in the United States. Buckley says that every spirituality deals with a theology of God, an understanding about what it means to be human, and ways or means to union with the Divine. To these three concerns, he adds questions related to religious experience:

1. What types of experience gave rise to and foster this spiritual perspective?
2. How were these experiences originally expressed?

3. What theology do these experiences foster?
4. How are such theologies and experiences communicated?³

In the academic field of spirituality, many scholars resonate with the approaches of Schneiders and Buckley, in large part because both recognize the crucial importance of experience. Spirituality is simply dominated by the dynamics of religious experience. Both approaches express profound encounters with God, ways of engaging God and the world, and the dynamics of inner transformation. Furthermore, both approaches also recognize the necessity of situating that experience in a structure of theological beliefs and commitments. Every religious experience and path comes with assumptions about how God and nature work, and every experience has to be interpreted. Finally, both approaches emphasize that spirituality is about religious practices and their transformational possibilities. This book will address Christian spirituality mostly through the interpretive lenses of both Schneiders's and Buckley's models. Some spiritualities easily fall into the framing we find in Schneiders's model, and with these her model is most helpful. Others with a less clear path can be best examined with Buckley's framework.

Most contemporary scholarship on spirituality also embraces several other factors, including the understanding that spirituality as such is not necessarily Christian. There are Buddhist spiritualities, Hindu spiritualities, Native American spiritualities, and so on. Because a number of spiritualities can exist even within a given religious tradition, scholars increasingly see spirituality in a less dogmatic or universally prescriptive way. There is no "one-size-fits-all" spirituality that guarantees holiness or can claim to be the only way to become holy. Given such considerations, studies in spirituality overall show less interest in an abstract goal of "perfection" and more interest in ongoing spiritual growth.

Finally, the study of spirituality is invested in everything that gives meaning to human growth and flourishing. Thus the field tends to be holistic, encompassing concerns about the environment, justice, prayer, primary relations, religious community, and so forth. Because spirituality incorporates so many aspects of the human condition, it is also interdisciplinary. Since spirituality involves community, it dialogs with sociology. Since it includes issues of justice, spirituality works with moral philosophy. Since it is concerned with human development, spirituality partners with the field of psychology. Indeed, spirituality has become so interdisciplinary that one can even find books in the field focusing on how quantum theory impacts meditation. Many studies, such as this one, show particular interest in historical and theological issues. Although scholars in spirituality cannot acquire expertise in every relevant field, they tend to have a sound understanding of several fields and apply insights from various disciplines to illuminate their particular areas of inquiry.

3. Michael Buckley, "Seventeenth Century French Spirituality: Three Figures," in *Christian Spirituality*, ed. Louis Dupré and Don Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 3:31–32.

Scholar as Insider

A scholar of spirituality is typically something of an insider, that is, someone who has a personal knowledge of the subject. While it would be inappropriate for the scholar to be essentially working autobiographically, it has become obvious in the field that the most creative and insightful work is done by those who have a participative knowledge of spirituality. Sandra Schneiders writes, “The researcher must know the spiritual quest by personal experience if he or she is able to understand the phenomena of spirituality. . . . A purely disinterested phenomenological approach seems inappropriate if not impossible for spirituality.”⁴ Schneiders compares spirituality to other fields where participation is critical: “Like psychology, spirituality deals with material that cannot be understood except through analogy with personal experience. It is difficult to imagine that one could understand mysticism, discernment of spirits, or spiritual direction without some personal participation in a spiritual life in which these phenomena or their analogues were experienced.”⁵

Christian Spirituality as a Field of Study

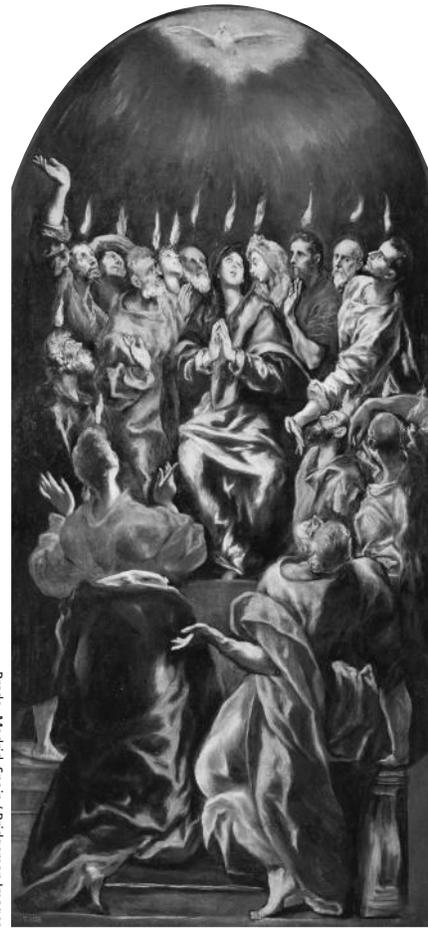
History of the Term

In Christianity the term “spirituality” has an interesting and varied history. The English word derives from the Latin *spiritualitas*, which itself is a translation influenced by the Greek noun *pneuma* (spirit). In the New Testament, the term *pneuma* refers both to the Holy Spirit and to the life of God working within the believer. It is this life of God working within that makes someone *pneumatikos* (spiritual). Jesus, in John’s Gospel, emphasizes a rebirth in the Spirit and in truth (John 3:2–8; 4:23), and both Luke’s Gospel and Acts of the Apostles have the Spirit establishing the community of believers (Luke 4:14; Acts 2:32–33). So integral is the Spirit to the presence of the risen Lord that Saint Paul even identifies the Christ with the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). Saint Paul also sees the nature of a Christian as entering the sphere of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), and the indwelling presence of God makes one a “spiritual person” (1 Cor. 2:14–15). In the Vulgate, a late fourth-century Latin translation of

4. Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” *Horizons* 13, no. 2 (1986): 268.

5. Sandra Schneiders, “Spirituality and the Academy,” *Theological Studies* 50, no. 4 (1989): 694–95.

the Bible, Saint Jerome used the term “spiritual” (*spiritualis*) twenty-two times as a translation of *pneumatikos*. The noun form of the term appeared in a fifth-century letter ascribed to Jerome: “*Age ut in spiritualite perfectias*” (Act in order to grow in spirituality).⁶ This is the way the early church typically used the term, and there was no real change in its usage through the first half of the Middle Ages.



Prado, Madrid, Spain / Bridgeman Images

Acts chapter 2 describes the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in the form of “divided tongues, as of fire.” The artist El Greco has added another traditional image of the Spirit: the dove.

preference) or even “perfection” (Methodist preference). Not until the twentieth century, with the publication of the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (1932), did the

In the twelfth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas continued to use *spiritualitas* to mean something like *pneumatikos*, but he also used the term to refer to that which distinguishes humans from other animals. For Aquinas, humans have a “rational soul,” that is they have the ability to reflect, pursue morality, and direct their lives to God. Thus they are “spiritual” beings. In contrast, other animals are irrational and have no soul or spirit. In his sixteenth-century *Vocabulary of Theology*, Johannes Altenstaig noted that the adjective “spiritual” referred to ways of acting religiously. It also referenced the kinds of spiritual exercises, such as meditation, that freed the soul from complete dependence on the senses. In the seventeenth century, the term was sometimes used pejoratively. “Spiritual people” were criticized as those who withdrew from the community or thought they were

above standard expressions of the faith. By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, “spirituality” tended to be replaced by “devotion” (Catholic preference) or “piety” (evangelical

6. As cited in Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 25–41, at 26.

term “spirituality” return to standard, widespread use. Later that century, journals took up the term. The journal *Révue d’ascétique et de mystique* renamed itself *Révue d’histoire de la spiritualité* in 1972, and in 1978 *Cross and Crown* became *Spirituality Today*.⁷

Emphases in the Study of Christian Spirituality

The study of Christian spirituality has a number of emphases. One emphasis, as noted earlier, is experience. From the beginning, the scriptures depict apostles and other early disciples as having experienced Jesus as risen and among them. They also experienced the Spirit, who both animated their faith in Jesus and guided their lives. Above all, Christian spirituality is interested in making sense of various expressions of God’s interaction with persons and communities, and the transformations they have experienced because of it.

Another emphasis is the use of scripture. The Bible provides the core themes, metaphors, and grand narratives out of which Christians make sense of God’s revelation in Christ. The Bible, as the first and foremost witness in Christian revelation, serves as a primary source for Christian spirituality.

Theological categories—and in some denominations, church doctrines—keep spirituality grounded in the Christian tradition. Thus theology constitutes another essential emphasis. Important theological themes and doctrines, such as church, grace, the Trinity, and salvation, have become normative and provide central teachings. Christian spirituality is not the study of such themes or doctrines—such as grace,⁸ for example—per se, but every Christian spirituality would necessarily deal with grace uniquely as it is experienced in that particular spirituality. Still, an authentic Christian spirituality would be assessed on whether or not its expression of grace proved theologically adequate.

Another emphasis involves history. As the saying goes, “You are your history,” and most studies in spirituality investigate classic historical models, whether from the monastic movement, Carmelite spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, or some other source. Even modern day expressions of spirituality tend to have a pedigree in previous historical models, although one cannot simply embrace a given historical model as though the culture from which it came were one’s own. Saint Francis of Assisi’s spirituality was rooted in many medieval themes, including assumptions about the body and its relationship to the soul, the centrality of Christ’s Passion as expressed in the church, and how the incarnation ought to be modeled in the Christian. This spirituality was also culturally contextualized by feudalism and a new burgeoning capitalism, widespread poverty, monarchies, chivalry, and other factors specific to that era. His situation differs

7. *Ibid.*, 28.

8. Grace is a theological theme that investigates God’s favor and saving presence.

greatly from the contemporary one, so a critical dialog between cultures will comprise a necessary part of any historical study.

Working with historical models tends to involve three major aspects. First, historical studies call for a *thick description* of everything relevant to the spirituality and the culture out of which it emerged—what could be called the “what is it?” phase of the study. Second, *critical analysis* seeks to make sense of it all, including problems and biases of the time that one would not want to export to today. One could call this the “what does it mean?” phase of the study. Third, *constructive interpretation* entails extrapolating the insights and genius of such a spirituality and finding ways to make these relevant to today, or the “what can it mean for us?” phase of the study.

Essential Characteristics of Christian Spirituality

While every Christian spirituality is unique, each contains universal and biblically grounded elements that express core values of Christian identity. Many scholars studying a given spirituality highlight how these elements are expressed in it, and some spiritualities are critiqued when one or more of the following elements is missing.

Christian Spirituality Is a Life of Grace and Faith

Most scholars would agree that the most important theologian in Christianity is Saint Paul. His letters, found in the New Testament, continue to influence both Christian theology and spirituality. Perhaps Paul’s most important concern is grace: God’s favor and life within us. Paul says that grace justifies Christians before God, making them acceptable to God, and spiritually animates their souls (Rom. 3:9, 22–24). Grace is also a gift. Christians believe that they cannot earn salvation by works, but rather that it comes only by God’s gift of himself.

If God’s grace is what saves, what is the appropriate human response to it? Paul’s answer is “faith.” So united are faith and grace that he will even say in shorthand that human beings are “justified by faith” (Rom. 3:28, 5:1). What is faith? Paul does not equate it merely with belief or accepting doctrines about one’s religion. Rather, faith represents entrusting oneself to God wholly. It is, from the human side, the dynamism of one’s heart and mind to open oneself to God, to trust and follow God. Although faith is sometimes thought of as “belief without evidence,” such a perspective is not Christian and would be referred to as “bad faith” or “blind faith.” Rather, the experience of the liberating grace of God provides the initial evidence, and one responds to it with one’s whole heart.

The life of faith is one of increasing spiritual freedom. Paul says in Galatians, “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to

the yoke of slavery” (5:1). Christianity understands human sinfulness as a kind of slavery, while the life of faith represents the true flourishing of a free person. This new kind of freedom is not freedom to do whatever one wants, if what one wants is sin, but rather freedom to love. In Martin Luther’s classic, *On Christian Liberty*, he writes, “I shall set down the following two propositions concerning freedom and bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁹ In this seeming paradox, Luther shows how freedom works. Being truly free means being in the position to serve others and serving, not by compulsion or to prove anything, but because the very nature of freedom is to live the full Christian life of loving care.

Christian Spirituality Is Life in the Spirit

As noted above, Paul believed that being spiritual meant living in the Holy Spirit and attending to the Spirit’s influence in one’s life: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Here Paul uses this listing to describe the kind of person whose life is infused with the Spirit.

The greatest sign of the animating presence of the Spirit, according to Paul, is the soul’s transformation in love. Paul teaches, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). Jesus too taught that all of the Old Testament law could be summed up as love: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40). Love is, for Jesus, the new and complete commandment (John 13:34; 15:10). Indeed 1 John declares that “God is love” (4:8). So central is this expression of the Christian life that one could safely say that with love one has God within oneself and without love one has no communion with God (1 John 2:10–11).

Christian Spirituality Is Christocentric

A fundamental goal of an authentic Christian spirituality consists of entering into a progressively deeper intimacy with Jesus Christ. Paul even described baptism as being “baptized into Christ” (Rom. 16:3), that is, immersed both in him and “into” him. This intimacy with Christ proves crucial to Christian

9. Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 2.

spirituality. In Jesus' final prayer, he prays, "So that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us. . . . I in them and you in me" (John 17:21–23).

This Christocentric principle also involves incorporating the fundamental mysteries of Christ. For Christians, the Incarnation of Christ not only creates the condition whereby God and humanity are united in him, it also provides a model for taking on the divine life within oneself. As Saint Augustine said, "God became human that humanity might become God."¹⁰ Here Augustine is not suggesting that humans actually exchange their human nature for the divine nature, but rather that the incarnation allows humanity to participate in God's life radically. The very nature of human existence becomes infused with divine possibilities.

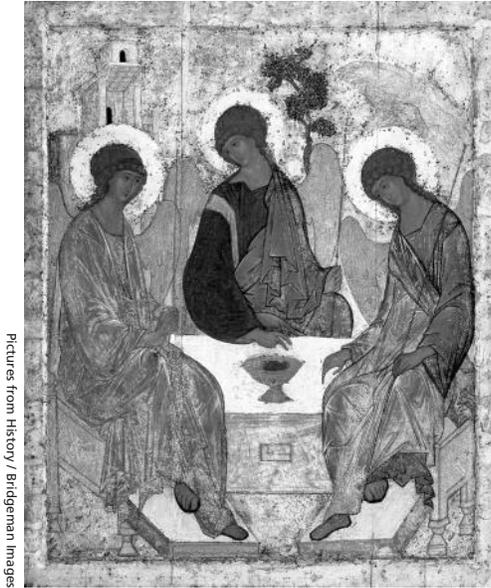
Another fundamental mystery of the Christian faith is the cross. Every Christian spirituality in some way embraces the cross or a kind of personal dying to self. The cross represents God's solidarity with suffering humanity. According to Christian theology, God in Christ literally became united to the very brokenness of the human condition and entered into that darkness with healing love. In Philippians, Paul pleads with community members to take on the mind of Christ, who emptied himself for humanity (Phil. 2:5–8). God's love is revealed here as self-donation. For Christians, the cross can represent a kind of dying to one's sinful self, the self that separates one from God and others. Paradoxically, the very dying to oneself and living for God becomes the condition of finding oneself in God's love.

The cross intrinsically connects to the Resurrection, and authentic Christian spirituality upholds this essential component. Paul proclaims, "If Christ has not been raised, then empty too is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Christianity the victory of the Resurrection already empowers believers to new life (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:3).

Christian Spirituality Is Trinitarian

Even as Christian spirituality emphasizes Jesus as the "one mediator between God and the human race" (1 Tim. 2:5), it yet maintains an understanding of God as Trinity. A typical expression of this Trinitarian thrust can be seen, for example, in the directive to pray to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The meaning of the Trinity is difficult to understand. According to the dogmas of the patristic church, Christianity does not believe in three separate beings who all have the divine nature. Nor is there one God who expresses himself in three ways. Rather, the Trinity reflects something of the communal dynamism of the one God.

10. Augustine, *Serm.* 13.



Pictures from History / Bridgeman Images

The Trinity is notoriously difficult to represent in art. This beautiful icon by Rublev (ca. 1360–1430) might be misunderstood as suggesting that the three persons are separate beings.

the very access to the Father, even as intimacy with the Word is conditioned by the Spirit.

One might consider it thus: the Holy Spirit is the spiritual context through which the risen Lord is known. Christian spirituality is a manifestation of life in the Spirit. The Father represents the eternal source of the Son and Holy Spirit. Augustine, among others, described the Trinity through the dynamic of love. If God is love, then a lover (Father) needs a beloved (Son), and when they share that love, it redounds to the lovers in creative power (Holy Spirit). Love is triune.

The Holy Spirit is the life of the church because the Spirit is the common good of the Father and the Son. The Spirit infuses believers with God's love. The Son, now incarnate, is

Christian Spirituality Is Communal

Paul envisions the community of believers as the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12–13). Although a metaphor, Paul saw it as an apt description of the true nature of Christian identity. During the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Roman Catholic Church described the universal call to holiness as intrinsically communal: “It has pleased God, however, to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.”¹¹ The importance of this principle can hardly be overstated. Christianity, by its nature, is a communion of believers, praying together, actively supporting each other's faith, and mutually discerning God's presence in their personal lives and community.

11. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 9, *The Documents of Vatican II*, general ed. Walter Abbott, trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

Christian Spirituality Is Just

The communal nature of Christian spirituality means that believers can never reduce the faith to merely “God and me” (and nobody else). Rather, spirituality has to include community and indeed the world, especially with regard to issues of justice. To ignore human suffering is to fail as a Christian, and a spirituality that does not attend to injustice is seriously deficient. As the Letter of James says, “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” (2:15–16).

This challenge by James is echoed throughout the Bible, particularly with the prophets. Isaiah described the true religious behavior as one of justice (58:1–9), and Jeremiah insisted that the temple would be forever defiled unless oppression against the poor was reversed (7:3–11). Amos even taught that Israel’s offerings to God were a blasphemy when justice was not attended to in the land (4:4–5). Justice comprises one of the great themes of the Bible and the Christian tradition.

Christian Spirituality Is Prayerful

The Christian tradition has widely insisted that prayer provides the cornerstone for intimacy with God. Origen, one of the great minds of the patristic era, writes, “Let our whole life be a constant prayer, because the Kingdom of God is established in all who bear the image of the man from heaven.”¹² Intimacy with Jesus and solicitude to the movements of the Spirit on one’s soul constitute a central aspect of Christian spirituality. The Christian tradition has widely insisted that such intimacy and solicitude are best cultivated through a life of prayer. Praise and worship order the soul to God, who is the source of all good. Petitionary prayer recognizes the universal need for God’s blessings. Meditation allows God to work in the soul through reflection on spiritual truths, particularly by using the Bible. Contemplation represents the soul’s silent longing for and openness to direct knowledge of God in one’s soul. Prayer is simply indispensable to authentic Christian spirituality.

Christian Spirituality Sees Divinization as Its Ultimate Horizon

Sandra Schneiders saw every spirituality as having an ultimate horizon. Christianity’s ultimate reference is the triune God. It could be argued, however, that its ultimate horizon, the ultimate end of the path, is actually divinization. The early church called this *theōsis*, which literally means “becoming God.” This is not a

12. Origen, *On Prayer* 22.5. Translation from *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 125.

literal, metaphysical change from human nature to the divine nature, but refers to living God's life as God lives God's life. Paul considered discipleship as living the very life of Christ within, bearing Christ's likeness and glory, becoming the very holiness of God and being filled with God.¹³ The profound goal that Paul foresees is "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

The First Letter of John also suggests a divinization, where on the last day all will be "like him" (3:2) and become "as he is" (4:17). Perhaps the most explicit description comes from the Second Letter of Peter: "His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion. . . . Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature" (1:3–4).

The spiritual tradition is replete with descriptions of this radical divine union. Christians do not imagine heaven merely as some *place* to go where one will be in the proximity of God. Rather, it is a full union with God where one lives in and through the Divine. As explored in later chapters, Christians believe that it is possible to experience in *this* life a kind of union that dramatically anticipates this future state.

Putting the Elements Together

The above-mentioned elements may seem quite abstract, but collectively they represent a robust Christian expression. To illustrate how these elements might come together in practice, let us imagine a new and fully engaged adult convert; we might call her Mary. Mary recognized that her life was flat and deeply lacking. She began investigating Christianity and came to see that it could provide direction and meaning—even ultimate meaning—to her life. Mary became baptized and fully took on the Christian faith. Placing her heart and soul in the hands of God felt like a great act of faith, which was both exciting and a little scary. Quite quickly she felt an astonishing inner freedom and communion with God. Mary began to develop a regular prayer life where she often felt close to God. Further, her church became like a second family and a place where she could continue to progress in her faith. Other members of her church also felt blessed by her enthusiasm, and it turned out that she was already ministering to others by her young witness to the gospel. The church was committed to service projects in the city and Mary quickly became conscious of Christianity's insistence of pursuing a just world. Mary's burgeoning Christian spirituality felt like a complete whole: God was filling her with love and her love naturally flowed out to want to help others. As Mary continued to grow in her faith life, her experience of God progressively reflected her truest, deepest self. She was getting a hint of what heaven must be like—living God's life.

13. See Rom. 8:14–17; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:19–20.

Recurrent Themes in the Spiritual Tradition

When considering the variety of ways of being Christian, regular themes emerge. Each recurrence comes with a different framing or new way of considering a given theme. These include the following:

The Way

A common theme in the Christian spiritual tradition is that Christianity poses a new way of life, one that is daunting, but ultimate. One of the oldest designations for Christians was that they were followers of “the way.”¹⁴ Jesus referred to this new way as utterly challenging and yet life-giving: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:13–14). Early Christian texts echo this. The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (ca. 90 CE) begins, “There are two ways, one of life and the other of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.”¹⁵ The *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 100 CE) concludes part of an exhortation, “This, therefore, is the way of light.” The epistle then contrasts it with “the way of the black one,” which is “crooked and completely cursed.”¹⁶

One insight in taking the image of “the way” is that the Christian life is something decidedly different from the ordinary road people travel. It is supposed to mean something truly decisive and unique. To be Christian is to think, look, and be different. A second insight is that the way is a road on which one advances. No one should expect to become holy in a day. As one progresses along the path, there will be setbacks, failures, and the realization that spiritual transformation comes slowly. It’s a process.

Discipleship

Discipleship emerges as another common theme. The term “disciple” literally means “one who learns,” and it refers to a follower. One of the most interesting dynamics in the Gospels is just how much the disciples had to learn from Jesus, and indeed how slow they often were to understand him. Similar to the idea that Christian spirituality is a way on which one progresses, discipleship is an ongoing learning process. Many Christians have reported that meditating on the scriptures or other religious texts through their adult lives gives them ever more to consider and incorporate in their lives. While Christian faith includes learning the

14. See Acts 9:2; 19:9; 22:4; 24:19; Heb. 10:20.

15. *Didache* 1.1. Translation from *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael Holmes, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Hamer, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 149.

16. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 19–20. Translation from *The Apostolic Fathers*, 185–86.

doctrines and practices within one's Christian tradition, above all it requires learning in terms of being a follower of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), in his seminal work *The Cost of Discipleship*, offers a telling insight into discipleship:

Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. . . . Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.¹⁷

What Bonhoeffer means here is that discipleship has to be more than just agreeing with doctrines; it must focus on profoundly knowing and following Christ, and at great cost.

The Three-Fold Pattern

A third regular theme is that of the three-fold progression of purgation, illumination, and union. Many classic formulations of interior growth and conversion assume this three-fold progress. The central idea underpinning purgation is that spiritual growth and maturity require moral progress that purges one from disordered attachments and habitual sins. For example, being a heavy drinker or prone to anger profoundly limits the possibilities of spiritual growth. Such sinful dispositions undercut spiritual progress and intimacy with God. Christians regularly claim that opening one's life to God's grace and diligently working to curb these disorders is a necessary foundation. The purged soul then has the freedom and spaciousness to pray more sincerely and with a fuller, purer heart. This provides the context in which one may come to a deeper knowledge of God's indwelling: the illuminative way. Further progress then allows the soul to come to know God in deep experiences of union whereby the soul and God regularly unite—even interpenetrate—and one gains a habitual knowledge of God's presence within: the unitive way.

A Path

Many Christian spiritualities describe the spiritual journey in terms of a specific set of stages. While the three-fold pattern listed above offers a path of sorts, many spiritualities articulate a more detailed series of stages that represent a spiritual course with defined markers. They frame one's ascent to union with God as a step-by-step process. The most famous patristic text describing such a path is Saint John Climacus's (525–606) *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in which he describes thirty specific steps to spiritual purification. The first three

17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 59.

reference a skillful decision to embrace the monastic life. The next four have to do with the kinds of virtues a new monk has to cultivate. The ensuing sixteen involve practices one should embrace as a means to undermine inordinate passions, such as anger or lust. The three that follow involve particularly sensitive interior virtues that condition deep contemplative prayer. And the final four reference ever-deepening expressions of prayer, with the final step involving outright union with God. Devotees to this program did not slavishly follow each step with no concern about issues in more advanced steps. Still, Climacus insisted that one has to crawl before one can walk, walk before one can run, and run before one can fly. There is an ordered progression.

Many other expressions of spiritual advancement lay out a relatively stable path. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) expressed an ever deepening religious life through the metaphor of types of spiritual kisses. Saint Catherine of Sienna (1347–1380) imagined levels of spiritual tears representing the soul's progress. Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) described the path of spirituality as involving twelve steps corresponding to the spiritual meaning of the twelve patriarchs in the Old Testament, and John Rusbroeck (1293–1381) describes a *Ladder of Spiritual Love*. The modern period offers no clearer example than Saint Teresa of Ávila's (1515–1582) *Interior Castle*, where she describes seven mansions, each representing more sensitive moral intuitions and a deeper knowledge of God's presence in the soul.

In all these presentations, the spiritual guides posit a series of stages of ascent to union with God that are marked by particular experiences and conditioned by various spiritual practices and virtues. Not all Christian spiritualities have such markings or stages, but many do. Such presentations help spiritual directors and those they guide to recognize particular challenges and possibilities as they progress.

Conclusion

Spirituality is such a widely used term that one might wonder whether it confers much specific meaning. Even in academic circles it can refer to a great many different things and be approached quite variously. Fundamentally, in both popular and academic settings, the term designates something essential—even most essential—about being human. It touches on how humans make sense of themselves in relation to things transcendental. The genius of artists and poets lies in their ability to tap into the heart and soul in ways that elevate human beings beyond conceiving of themselves and their relationships merely in materialistic or utilitarian terms. There is a realm of meaning and truth, a realm of the spirit that cannot be reduced to science or banal cultural exchanges of commerce or politics.

Christian Spirituality as a field of study identifies that realm through history, theology, scripture, and, above all, experience, in ways that both highlight

the Christian life and show skillful paths to engage it. The study of spirituality requires a breadth of knowledge in all these fields as well as allied disciplines in the academy. Utilizing this breadth, the study of spirituality provides deep, penetrating insight into Christian understandings of the life of grace and ways to become holy.

Questions for Review

1. *Spirituality* is a difficult term to define. What two theoretical frameworks do scholars use to analyze a given spirituality?
2. What were the origins of the term *spirituality*? How was the term used historically, and how is it used today?
3. What are the main elements of a Christian spirituality?
4. What are the recurring central themes in Christian spirituality?

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think accounts for the interest in spirituality today?
2. This chapter identifies a number of emphases in Christian spirituality. How would you rank them in order of importance? What is the basis for your ranking?
3. Christian spirituality emphasizes experience. Why do you think that is, and what challenges might a scholar have in assessing religious experience?

Bibliography

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Internet Resources

The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. <https://sscs.press.jhu.edu>.

The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality is widely considered the premier society for the academic study of spirituality. The society also publishes *Spiritus: The Journal of Christian Spirituality*.

Films

Filmsite. "Top 100 Spiritually-Significant Films." www.filmsite.org/top100spiritual.html.

A list and description of one-hundred films that have either overt themes in spirituality or deal with issues important to spirituality.