Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality

Sandra M. Schneiders

CHAPTER 1

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Spirituality as an *academic field* is the study of spirituality as an *existential phenomenon* (the material object) under a formality (the formal object) which distinguishes it from theology, on the one hand, and religious studies, on the other. This requires, if not a definition, at least an identification of the phenomenon being studied and a description of the specific formality under which it is being studied. This task will be briefly addressed in the first part of this essay.

The second part will deal with the major topic of this essay: basic contemporary approaches to the academic study of spirituality. By approaches, I mean orienting frameworks within which specific methodologies are developed for the study of particular phenomena within the field of spirituality. Approaches reflect primarily the types of knowledge (or skills) the student seeks to attain which reflect the aspects of spirituality that she or he finds most interesting or important. Methodologies are articulated complexes of procedures (methods) which are developed to investigate what is of interest. Methods do not, or at least should not, dictate either what can be studied or how it should be studied. Rather, methods are systematic attempts to ensure the validity and fruitfulness of the research. Our concern in this essay is with approaches rather than with methodologies or specific methods.

The third part of the essay will address a specific issue in the academic field of spirituality, namely, how the self-implicating character of the study of the human search for God influences work in the field.

The reader should bear in mind that spirituality is studied in a variety of academic contexts and the objectives pursued in these diverse settings significantly influence what is studied and how it is studied. In this respect, spirituality is analogous to some other humanistic fields of study, such as psychology. A freshman in college may study psychology primarily to gain some understanding of her or himself or to determine whether this field might become her or his major. A master's student may wish to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to become a secondary school counselor. A physician may be doing a clinical specialization to become a psychiatrist. Or a PhD

student may be primarily interested in theoretical research in the field. Any or all of these objectives might be simultaneously operative and mutually influencing in the work of any particular student. Analogously, some students of spirituality, especially those in formation programs and students taking their first courses in religion, are often primarily concerned with their own spiritual development. Some, especially those in seminary-type programs, are primarily concerned with learning how to mediate the riches of Christian spirituality to others and how to discern and deal with the spiritual concerns of those in their pastoral care. Others, particularly those in doctoral-level programs in spirituality, are primarily concerned with the qualitative and quantitative expansion of knowledge in the field and becoming equipped to contribute to the field by their own research and teaching in the future. However, while it is important to distinguish these objectives and attend to the differences they introduce into the approaches to the study of spirituality, it would be artificial to pretend that researchers have no interest in their own spiritual lives or in assisting others in theirs or that pastors have no need of theoretical knowledge of the spiritual life. In short, although the *field* of spirituality is a broad terrain in which personal, practical, and theoretical projects are pursued and interact, the *academic discipline* of spirituality is primarily the research discipline whose specific objective is the expansion of our knowledge and understanding of the God–human relationship.

Finally, while spirituality as such is not necessarily religious, denominational, or confessional, this volume is concerned with Christian spirituality. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, spirituality in this essay means Christian spirituality.

Spirituality as a Field of Study

The material object: spirituality as existential phenomenon

Christian spirituality as an academic discipline studies the lived experience of Christian faith, the subjective appropriation of faith and living of discipleship in their individual and corporate actualization(s). Because this definition is so general as to be open to misinterpretation, I would prefer to situate Christian spirituality as existential phenomenon within a more nuanced definition of spirituality in general and then specify it as Christian. Spirituality is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence and will be defined for the purposes of this essay as the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives. Each element of the definition helps to specify what we are discussing.

First, spirituality is not simply spontaneous experience, however elevating or illuminating, but a conscious and deliberate way of living. It is an ongoing project, not merely a collection of experiences or episodes. Thus, lived spirituality is often referred to as one's "spiritual life," a term I will use occasionally in what follows. Second, the project is not self-enclosed but orients the subject beyond purely private satisfaction toward the ultimate good, the highest value, that the person recognizes, which may be God but might also be something other than God, for example, the full personhood of all

humans, world peace, enlightenment, or the good of the cosmos. Third, the ultimate value functions as a horizon luring the person toward growth. Hence, the spiritual life is intrinsically dynamic. Finally, this definition allows us to disqualify as spirituality negative life-organizations such as addictions (no matter how all-consuming they might be), exploitative or aggressive projects that seek the good of the individual at the expense of others or the rest of creation (no matter how energizing such a project might be), or venal concerns with money, power, or pleasure.

Christian spirituality as Christian specifies the horizon of ultimate value as the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ to whom Scripture normatively witnesses and whose life is communicated to the believer by the Holy Spirit making her or him a child of God. This new life, which Paul calls "life in the Spirit" (cf. Rom. 7: 6; 8: 2, 6, 10–11; Gal. 6: 8) is celebrated sacramentally within the believing community of the church and lived in the world as mission in and to the coming reign of God. This life of faith and discipleship constitutes the existential phenomenon that Christian spirituality as a discipline studies.

The contemporary discipline of spirituality, aware that the human subject and its context are immensely more complex than was once thought, attends to topics that, in the past, were considered peripheral or irrelevant to the spiritual life. Today we recognize that the subject of Christian spirituality is the human being as a whole: spirit, mind, and body; individual and social; culturally conditioned and ecologically intertwined with all of creation; economically and politically responsible. The Christian's spirituality, although individually unique and intensely personal, is not a private or purely "interior" affair concerned exclusively with prayer and the practice of virtue. It is, as Peter Van Ness (1996: 5) described spirituality in general, the relation of the whole of oneself to reality as a whole. In the field of Christian spirituality, both "self" and "reality" are defined by Christian faith.

The formal object: spirituality as religious experience

All Christian theology studies Christian faith: God, Christ, Scripture, sacraments, church, morality, and so on. And the locus in which these realities appear is, ultimately, the experience of the church in its members throughout its history. In other words, all theology is an investigation of experientially rooted *faith*. The distinguishing characteristic, or formal object, of spirituality as a field of study is its specific focus on Christian faith as the *experience* of the concrete believing subject(s). In other words, spirituality studies not simply Christian faith but the lived experience of Christian faith.

Experience, religious or otherwise, is notoriously difficult to define. We might begin by saying that to experience is to be "subjectively aware" and that experience is always "experience of." First, experience is by definition subjective and, as such, incommunicable. My pain cannot be felt by you even though, because you have experienced pain, you can empathize, by entering analogically into my experience, and thus understand it. Experience, including spirituality as existential phenomenon, can only be communicated by articulation in "texts": verbal, literary, artistic, behavioral, and so on (cf.

Ricoeur 1976: 16, 30–1). Second, since experience is always "experience of," there is an object, "something" to articulate and to be understood. Thus, even in the case of mystical experience, which is the most ineffable of religious experiences, the subject can and does say something intended to allow the reader/listener access to "something." This articulated "something," precisely as experience, is the object of spirituality as a field of study, what the researcher wants to understand.

Since religious experience as experience can only be accessed in its articulations, the student of spirituality is always dealing with "texts." Again, the analogy with psychology is illuminating. The psychologist is not studying anxiety as such or in general but the particular experience of anxiety of this individual or group. Verbalization, texts, drawings, dreams, behaviors, and other such articulations of the anxiety are the psychologist's access to the particular experience of anxiety. In attempting to understand this particular experience, the psychologist draws on the large body of theoretical knowledge about anxiety as well as on his or her own direct or vicarious experiences of anxiety or related states. But neither the general theory nor the therapist's experience is the focus of study in this case. The material object of the therapist's attention is anxiety, but the formal object is anxiety as lived experience.

Similarly, the student of spirituality is not studying prayer as such but, for example, the prayer of Teresa of Avila as it is articulated in *The Interior Castle* and is manifest in her life which, itself, is mediated by her autobiography. The researcher presumably has considerable theoretical knowledge of prayer both through theological and psychological study and through personal and/or vicarious experience. But the focus of study is neither the theology of prayer nor the researcher's experience of prayer, but specifically the prayer of Teresa of Avila.

Spirituality, in other words, is an instance of what Paul Ricoeur (1976: 78–9) calls "the science of the individual." Studies in spirituality do not aim to develop a second-order theoretical language about the spiritual life which can be verified in all authentic Christian spirituality, but to investigate the spiritual life as it is and has been concretely lived. Spirituality is related to theology as the study of Hamlet, or even the Shakespearean corpus, is to the study of literary theory. The "individuals" that spirituality studies may be specific persons like Teresa, or specific movements like Benedictine monasticism, or themes like "the world," or practices like centering prayer, spiritual direction, or religious pacifism. Although there is constant interplay between the knowledge of the particular individual(s) which enriches theoretical knowledge of the spiritual life and the theoretical knowledge which helps illuminate the interpretation of the individual, the focus/object of spirituality as a field of study is the experience of the spiritual life *as* experience. Consequently, unlike theology, whose analyses and conclusions intend applicability to all instances in the class in question (for example, an adequate theology of grace should be applicable to all the baptized), spirituality studies unique experiences of the living of Christian faith which, in their very uniqueness, can encourage, challenge, warn, illuminate, confirm, expand, subvert, or otherwise interact with both general theological theory, on the one hand, and other specific experiences of faith, on the other. Dorothy Day's pacifist spirituality, for example, ran counter to the official theology of the US Catholic bishops during World War II and could not be fully appropriated by her (presumably very holy) contemporary, Thomas Merton.

Day's pacifism can be theologically related to, but not fully contained within, the Catholic just-war theory and studied within the context of moral theology. But the discipline of spirituality studies Day's pacifism as the existential encounter with the Beatitudes that shaped the unique faith experience and lived discipleship of this particular woman and both challenged and expanded our understanding of Christian faith and life (Krupa 1997).

Although three different approaches to the study of spirituality will be discussed below, it is important to realize that they interact continuously in most real research projects and that all three, influenced by the postmodernity that has emerged in the academy since the mid-twentieth century, are marked by the linguistic-hermeneutical turn that has undermined the scientistic positivism of the modern period.

Three Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality

The three approaches to spirituality as an academic discipline that will be discussed in this section – the historical, the theological, and the anthropological – are derived from reading, discussions, and observations in the field over the past thirty to forty years. In other words, this is not a *de jure* prescriptive classification but a *de facto* heuristic taxonomy.

The historical approach

The least controversial approach to the study of spirituality is the historical approach. This is due largely to the fact that history as a modern academic discipline has always admitted subject matter specializations, such as the history of Western Europe, the Enlightenment, the papacy, Baroque music, women's dress, or medieval penal methods. As long as something happened or existed, it is legitimate within the discipline of history to study it historically. Consequently, an interest in studying religious experience or some aspect of it as an historical reality does not need any particular justification, even if "locating" and identifying the object is problematic.

Many scholars approaching spirituality historically, both in the past and today, are actually primarily historians *of* spirituality rather than scholars of spirituality whose approach is primarily historical. The former are scholars who approach the phenomena of spirituality as trained historians, differing from their religious studies colleagues in religious or church history, not in terms of their understanding of historiography, historical methods, or the desired outcomes of research in terms of historical analyses or interpretations, but in regard to what they are interested in studying, namely, Christian religious experience. Many secular historians have done excellent work on Christian religious life, figures, literature, and movements (for example, Bynum 1987; Brown 1988; Ranft 1996). What seems to differentiate the historian of spirituality (for example, McGinn 1991–8) from the religious studies historian of religion is an interest in interpreting what is being studied as Christian faith experience within the context of Christian theology.

Historical spirituality scholars, on the other hand, are scholars of spirituality (not of history) who find the historical approach particularly useful for their projects (for example, Bynum 1982; Short 1999; McGinn 2001). Thus a researcher interested in the tradition of "nuptial spirituality" (mystical experience understood and expressed through the metaphor of "marriage to Christ") may decide to study its expression in the spirituality of the thirteenth-century beguines (Murk-Jansen 1998) or through the commentaries on the biblical Song of Songs in the works of Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Edward Taylor in the historical context of their respective lives and practice. The historical approach and its methodology are in the service of understanding nuptial spirituality rather than the construction of a history of nuptial spirituality or of interpretation of the Song of Songs as a text that nourished mystical experience in different periods. As the authors referenced above exemplify, the same scholar may function at different times, or even in the same work, as an historian of spirituality primarily interested in the development of some facet of spirituality and at other times as a spirituality scholar primarily interested in some aspect of spirituality studied within its historical context.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, historians of spirituality shared with other historians, including most biblical scholars, a modernist understanding of history itself and of its methods and results. The modern historian was preoccupied with "what really happened" as that could be determined by the use of historical critical methods. And what "mattered" historically was the activity of major figures (almost always hegemonic Western males) and major movements (almost always those of the historical winners). Economic, political, military, and religious events dominated the concerns of modernist historians, biblical, social, cultural, and religious. Historiography was largely the attempt to construct uni-directional, periodized, cause-and-effect metanarratives that explained how and why things came to be and to be a certain way. Furthermore, historians tended to see this diachronic analysis of "the past" as genetic and the genetic as sufficient explanation, at least on the human level, of whatever took place in space and time. This is the context in which the modern study of the history of spirituality began in centers such as Paris and Rome, and the histories of spirituality that emerged (for example, Pourrat 1953–5; Cognet 1959; Leclercq et al. 1968) bore the imprint of this type of historical work. Until relatively recently, historians of spirituality tended to equate spirituality as a discipline with the history of spirituality, wondering aloud what else there might be to study except what has actually occurred as mediated through historical "texts," broadly understood. Today, they, as well as scholars of spirituality who take an historical approach to their subject matter, are aware that history is one access, among others, to phenomena that are indeed historical but have other equally interesting dimensions (for example, Norris 1996; Lane 2002).

In the final quarter of the twentieth century, all historical study began to feel the effects of the emergence of postmodernism in scholarship. Historians themselves began to question the basic assumptions of the historical critical method: that something objective "really happened" and had a kind of free-standing existence "in the past" that was accessible by proper methods; that the "real story" could be unearthed and told by the objective scholar who had no personal (and therefore distorting) role in that story;

that something like the "whole story" could be told; that causes could be determined which could only have produced what in fact happened, and so on. Revisionist history, history written from the underside and the margins, the stories of the historical losers and victims, the aspects and dimensions of the past that once seemed unimportant or uninteresting, began to emerge into the concerns of historians who increasingly acknowledged that they were not studying or writing "history" pure and simple but offering one of many possible constructions of the admittedly partial available data whose authority as evidence was, in the last analysis, conferred by the historian rather than discovered as objective and self-evident (Sheldrake 1992).

All of these currents are still very much in their developmental phases, but they are influencing all historical work (Burnett 2000), including the history of spirituality. Historians of spirituality are still concerned with establishing reliable texts, accessing the available data of past Christian experience, discerning connections, patterns, and influences (causal and otherwise), but they are also interested in analyses and criticisms that are not exclusively concerned with the uncovering or establishment of "the facts" but with the interpretation of whatever can be known. And they are very aware that interpretation is a function of the identity, social location, and presuppositions of the interpreter and the power arrangements that affect and are affected by interpretation. In other words, postmodernism in general, and the linguistic-hermeneutical turn in particular, are profoundly affecting historical work.

The historical approach to the study of spirituality is still primarily the work of professional historians whose interest centers on the lived experience of the faith which they share either actually or empathetically with their subjects, but whose methods tend to be those of the increasingly hermeneutical historical disciplines augmented by theological expertise. Increasingly, the methodologies of history are also being used by spirituality scholars who are not professional historians but find historical approaches most useful for their work. The results of historical studies in spirituality are not only valuable in themselves as investigations of Christian religious experience throughout the ages, but also are essential to any valid study in the field of spirituality because they supply the context for and/or constitute the positive data upon which other approaches exercise their inquiries. Spirituality as lived experience takes place only in time and space, within particular cultural contexts, in interaction with the other persons and forces operative in the same context, and influenced by what and who has preceded it. In this sense, all study in the field of spirituality is historical whether the purpose is to provide a history of a given phenomenon (history of spirituality) or to understand the phenomenon itself by means of historical approaches to the subject matter (historical spirituality).

The challenge for those approaching spirituality historically is to avoid either reducing spirituality to an account of "what happened" or accounting for "what happened" in purely genetic terms as what can be discerned by historical methods, and to recognize that even phenomena of the past can and must be studied by a variety of methods if the experience is to be understood as experience. Theology, psychology, gender, art, rhetoric, science, and so on must complement history to give access to religious experience in its uniqueness.

The theological approach

The contemporary theological approach to the study of spirituality has a complex history which must be taken into account in attempting to understand what scholars who take this approach today are doing. The Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, and Catholic developments have been quite diverse. While the Orthodox have attempted to maintain the synthesis of theology and spirituality that characterized the pre-medieval common tradition, the split between theology and spirituality that occurred in the High Middle Ages has been variously handled by the other three branches. In the wake of the Reformation, Protestant orthodoxy was suspicious of "mysticism," insofar as the term suggested elitism or paranormal experience that was not rooted in Scripture and open to all believers, and of "spirituality" which suggested a works-righteousness approach to the life of faith. Protestants preferred to speak of "piety," a daily discipline of Scripture reading and prayer, both personal and familial, which was promoted by both theoretical and exhortatory literature from figures such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Jeremy Taylor, and others.

Anglicans preferred the term "devotion" to that of piety, but also spoke of the "inner life" and the "life of perfection" which had affinities with Catholic approaches. Anglican spirituality was deeply rooted in the *Book of Common Prayer* and thus had a distinctively liturgical shape and content. Out of this tradition, the Anglicans, especially the English, also developed a voluminous literature on the spiritual life that was both practical (for example, Law 1978) and theoretical (for example, Underhill 1942) and which continues to bear the stamp of this sensibility (for example, Jones et al. 1986). Distinctive to the Catholic tradition was the incorporation of the study of spirituality into the university curriculum as a subdiscipline within theology. It is this Catholic academic development that is particularly significant for understanding the current development of spirituality as a discipline within the academy.

From the time of Dionysius (probably sixth century) through the Middle Ages (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II: 2.45.2) and into modern times in the writings of authors such as John of the Cross, "mystical theology" referred not to an object of study or a body of speculative or practical knowledge attained by the theologian but to an experiential knowledge of God infused into the soul by God in/as contemplation. John of the Cross says: "The sweet and living knowledge that she [the soul] says he [God] taught her is mystical theology, the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation" (*The Spiritual Canticle* 27: 5). Once theology came to be understood not so much as rumination on Scripture but primarily as a philosophically elaborated academic specialization in the university curriculum (thirteenth century and beyond), spiritual theology gradually came to be thought of not as the noetic effect of spiritual experience but as a subdiscipline of theology (dogmatic and moral) which could be studied and mastered as other subjects were. The question then became not how to dispose the spirit through reading and meditation for the free inflow of God's wisdom in contemplation, but what subject matter was to be studied and how, in order to understand the content and dynamics of the spiritual life. Spiritual theology emerged in the academy as a distinct subject in the seventeenth century as theologians and spiritual

guides tried to systematize the available knowledge of the spiritual life in terms of the reigning scholastic theologies (for example, Scaramelli 1917; Tanquerey 1932; Garrigou-Lagrange 1950; Aumann 1980).

From the seventeenth century into the mid-twentieth century spiritual theology was understood (in Catholic academic circles which is where it was elaborated and pursued) as the theoretical study of "the life of perfection," meaning the interior life of persons (usually monks, nuns, and mystics) who attempted to live their Christian calling more intensely than so-called "ordinary Christians" whose spiritual life was characterized by vocal prayer, moral rectitude, and the faithful observance of the duties of their state in life (Saudreau 1926). This "science of perfection" drew its principles from theology, of which it remained a subdiscipline, and was eminently practical in intent, namely, to equip the spiritual director of those "seeking perfection" to guide these special souls in their three-stage journey through purification (the way of beginners) and illumination (the way of proficients) to mystical union (the way of perfection). Spiritual theology was divided into two parts: ascetical theology, which studied the "active life" (the stages of the spiritual life in which the activity of the subject in vocal and mental prayer, the practice of virtue, asceticism, and so on, was possible and effective), and mystical theology or the "passive life" (the stage of the spiritual life in which the activity of the Holy Spirit replaces that of the human subject who cannot effect the mystical union with God which is characteristic of this final stage). Note the change in meaning of the term "mystical theology" from the experiential knowledge of God directly produced in the soul by infused contemplation to the study of mystical experience as an object. Spiritual theology, then, was the field of study whose object was the whole spiritual life, and mystical theology was one of the two subdivisions of that field.

By the mid-twentieth century this classical theological subdiscipline had, for various reasons, come under serious question not only from Protestants but from within Catholicism itself. The three-stage understanding of the spiritual life, which can be traced back into the patristic period, seemed to have been systematized beyond recognition. The biblical basis of this rigid and somewhat artificial systematization was highly doubtful. But the major theological objections were that the approach was elitist, divisive, and seemed to deny the universal call of the baptized to the fullness of the spiritual life since not all, according to this schema, were called to the third stage (mystical union) in this life; it subverted the unity of the spiritual life in which, as the great spiritual guides of the past had always recognized, purification, illumination, and union are simultaneous and overlapping even when one or the other predominates at a particular stage of spiritual development; it seriously restricted the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life by assigning the full operation of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit (which, according to traditional theology, are received in the sacraments of initiation) to the final stage of the spiritual life to which relatively few are called. These texts tended to over-emphasize paranormal experience – something which all the great mystics greatly relativized and even cautioned contemplatives against – as a distinguishing feature of the final stage of the spiritual life.

The primary practical objections to the classical spiritual theology paradigm were that it over-systematized and therefore fragmented the spiritual life which is much more organic and developmental; it was too restrictively concerned with the "interior life"

(meaning prayer and the practice of virtue), whereas advances in psychology were making people much more aware of the complexity of the human subject and the involvement of all dimensions of the person in the spiritual life; it was highly prescriptive (even mechanistic), taking too little account of personal individuality; it paid little attention to the "ordinary Christian" who was, presumably, not "seeking perfection" even though experience suggested that there were many real saints among these non-cloistered God-seekers "in the world."

By the time of the Second Vatican Council, which reaffirmed the universality of the call to one and the same holiness (*Lumen gentium* 5), classical modern "spiritual theology" was giving way to what many modern believers found much more interesting, namely, "spirituality." This term gained currency throughout the second half of the twentieth century, gradually being adopted by Jews and Muslims as well as Christians across the denominational spectrum, Buddhists, Hindus, primal peoples, and adherents of other non-Christian traditions, and even by non-religious seekers such as some feminists, ecologists, New Agers, and eclectic practitioners who denied any interest in religion (Van Ness 1996). Paulist Press, in its influential series "Classics of Western Spirituality," included non-Christian spiritual texts (for example, Jewish and Islamic). The Crossroad *Encyclopedia of World Spiritualities* gave a non-restrictive description of spirituality as the existence and the dynamics of "the spirit" understood as the "deepest center of the person" (Cousins 1985: xiii) and devoted only three of its projected twenty-five volumes to Christian spirituality.

This very rapid extension of the referent of "spirituality" beyond its original Christian meaning (cf. Schneiders 1989, for a history of the term) raised the question, for scholars in the field of Christian spirituality, about the distinctiveness of their discipline. Clearly, the distinguishing mark of Christian spirituality as Christian is its rootedness in the Christian religious tradition which, for Protestants, Anglicans, Catholics, and Orthodox, has tended to be expressed and systematized in the theological tradition (dogmatic and moral, biblical, liturgical, and historical). In other words, Christian spirituality is Christian because of its relationship to the creed, code, and cult of the church's tradition. Those scholars, often working in confessional academic contexts such as seminaries and formation programs, who are less interested in interaction with non-Christian spiritualities than with Christian spirituality as such, tend therefore to focus on the theological identity of the latter (for example, Leech 1985; Senn 1986; Hanson 2000). While recognizing the importance of the history of spirituality and acknowledging the breadth of interest in the field outside the Christian sphere, these scholars choose to focus on spirituality from a specifically Christian, therefore theological, perspective.

I would suggest, in order to distinguish what these contemporary scholars in the field are doing from the classical "spiritual theology" described above, that it would be better to refer to the former as "theological spirituality" rather than "spiritual theology." The *focus* of these scholars is not on theology as such but on spirituality. It is their *approach* that is theological in that they work primarily within the framework established by Scripture, theology, and sacramental practice. They are not primarily interested in establishing a theory of the spiritual life (theology as second-order discourse such as classical spiritual theology attempted) applicable to all Christians or prescribing the

practice of the spiritual life (an ascetical or moral program for spiritual development). Like other scholars in the field, they start with religious experience rather than with premises or propositions. They are certainly not exclusively focused on the "interior life," but very aware of the holistic character of the human subject and her or his religious experience. Furthermore, they recognize that all Christians are called to mature in the spiritual life and that they share this calling with non-Christians. Finally, although they use the basic coordinates of Christian theology to organize their work and accord these coordinates a normative role in their analyses and criticism of spiritual experience, they do not deduce the content or dynamics of the spiritual life of the individual or the community from inarguable theological premises. For example, the contemporary scholar studying faith as religious experience within a theological approach does not start with the definition of faith as theological virtue, its character as gift of the Spirit, or the moral obligations it entails, but with questions such as how human beings come to faith and how human faith is related to religious faith, developmental patterns of growth in faith, the effect on faith of the super-ego, superstition, projection, and so on, the variety of expressions of faith, and the relation of faith to religious practice. The theological character of faith is operative in the definition of the sphere of investigation, in the analyses of the related experiences, in the evaluation of the data surfaced in the investigation, in the appropriation of the results of the study. But it does not function purely deductively (to supply the "right" answers) or prescriptively (to disallow seemingly incompatible experience or enforce attitudes or behaviors deemed compatible with theological answers). In other words, what distinguishes the contemporary theological approach to spirituality is its emphasis on the specifically Christian character of the subject matter (religious experience) and the constitutive role of Christian theology in the methodologies developed to study that subject matter.

All Christian spirituality is Christian because of its rootedness in the normative texts and the communal experience of the church. It is, by definition, the living of Christian faith, not some vague concern with the "more" in life or some eclectic amalgam of practices or beliefs (Rolheiser 1999; Ranson 2002; Schneiders 2003). The contribution of the theological approach to spirituality is that it keeps the specifically Christian character of the discipline in focus and reminds everyone in the field, whatever their preferred approach, that Christianity is a specific faith tradition that has content and dynamics it does not share with other traditions, even those with analogous concerns.

The challenge for those who take a theological approach to the study of Christian spirituality is to remember that there is more to Christian spirituality than theologically articulated faith. The subject of Christian spirituality is a complex human being participating in a plurality of communities and whose multiple dimensions and involvements particularize the appropriation and expression of faith, often in ways that the general theory of the faith (theology) cannot or has not yet comprehended or articulated. In the first instance, spirituality gives rise to theology rather than the other way around. And theology never fully comprehends the experience it seeks to understand. Lived spirituality will always involve elements and aspects which can only be investigated adequately by the use of other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, art, rhetoric, or science. The interdisciplinary character of the contemporary field of spiri-

tuality is not simply a trendy postmodern methodological choice but a response to the nature of religious experience and human knowledge in the contemporary context.

The anthropological approach

The third approach to the study of Christian spirituality, the anthropological, is the most recent development in the field and is most clearly influenced by postmodernity, both cultural and academic. This approach is rooted in the recognition that spirituality is an anthropological constant, a constitutive dimension of the *humanum* (Breton 1990). Human beings are characterized by a capacity for self-transcendence toward ultimate value, whether or not they nurture this capacity or do so in religious or non-religious ways. Consequently, spirituality as a feature of humanity as such is existentially (though not always experientially) prior to any particular actualization of spirituality as Christian, Buddhist, ecological, and so on. Christian spirituality is a particular experiential actualization of this human capacity and the discipline of Christian spirituality studies this particular actualization, but it can never abstract completely from the realization that Christianity shares both the experience we call spirituality and the field which studies such experience with other religious traditions and even non-religious movements. Such an awareness could not have emerged prior to the kinds of interactions, cultural and religious, that characterized the late twentieth century.

The anthropological approach to Christian spirituality, while taking seriously the historical and theological dimensions of the subject matter of the field, is also explicitly concerned with dimensions of spirituality that are accessible only to non-theological disciplines, such as the aesthetic, linguistic, psychological, or cosmological; with the "edges" where the field of spirituality is influenced by important aspects of contemporary experience that are not intrinsic to Christianity itself, such as the meaning of experience, ecological concerns, and gender issues; with the analogies with, challenges to, and affirmations of Christian experience coming from the spiritualities of other religious traditions or the spiritualities of contemporary seekers who repudiate or ignore institutional religion (Conn 1989, 1996; Liebert 1992; Burton-Christie 1994; Kline 2002; Saliers 2002). The anthropological approach to Christian spirituality, therefore, has much in common with contemporary theology done in the context of a theology of religions. It starts with the premise that Christian spirituality is first human and then Christian, that spirituality is ontologically prior to its specification by history and theology. And this opens it *a priori* to all that surrounds it. If nothing human is foreign to the Christian, then nothing spiritual is foreign to Christian spirituality.

Like postmodern research in general, anthropologically oriented studies in Christian spirituality tend to emphasize hermeneutical methodology. The primary focus of research is interpretation of the subject matter of the field in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of Christian spirituality as an instance of the human search for transcendence and ultimate meaning. Hermeneutics has a double focus: understanding and explanation (i.e., the expansion of knowledge), on the one hand, and appropriation (i.e., the expansion of subjectivity), on the other (Ricoeur 1976: 71–95). In the field of spirituality, the first focus leads the researcher to investigate the phe-

nomena of Christian faith experience within the widest and richest available frame of reference in order to understand it as deeply as possible, thus expanding, qualitatively and quantitatively, our knowledge of the Christian spiritual life. The second focus is the widening of the horizon of the interpreter, which involves an expansion or deepening of subjectivity, of the self. In other words, personal transformation of the researcher (with implications for the world including the church) is integral to this approach. But this transformation is not so much in terms of better practice of the Christian faith (though this is not excluded) as in terms of an expansion of one's humanity, especially through encounter with the "other," whether personal, cultural, religious, intellectual, or through active participation in transformative praxis. The researcher is not so much learning what to do or how to do it better or how to help others in the spiritual life. She or he is becoming a spiritually richer and deeper person.

This new approach to spirituality, clearly a response to the increasingly diverse interactions among scholars from a variety of religious traditions and scholarly disciplines, has drawn many scholars in the field of Christian spirituality beyond exclusively Christian and strictly confessional boundaries. They recognize that spirituality is a universal human concern that is significant for the human enterprise as a whole. The question that was once posed as how Christianity could propagate itself and its gospel message for the salvation of the world has been recast as how Christian spirituality is related to other versions of the human quest for ultimate meaning and value, what Christians can learn from others as well as offer to others in terms of the spiritual life, and how all those interested in the future of the human race and the planet can mobilize the resources of their respective traditions to transform the lives of their own adherents for the ultimate good of all. In short, Christian spirituality anthropologically approached has become public discourse, both culturally and academically, and is learning to participate in a conversation it does not totally control, without losing or diminishing its specifically Christian identity.

The anthropological approach to spirituality manifests unmistakably postmodern sensibilities. It is wary of metanarratives, substantialism, and absolutisms of all kinds, even those emerging from heretofore unquestioned theological premises. It is especially aware of the mutually determining relationship between spirituality as experience and religion as tradition or institution, with the consequent relativizing of the latter's heretofore unquestioned priority. The postmodern sense of universal relativity encourages an ever-widening definition of religious experience, on the one hand, and a sharpened sense of the irreducible "otherness" of experiences that are not one's own (Fredericks 2003), on the other. Consequently, not only a complexification of the holistic approach to the human subject of religious experience but a heightened awareness of the dimensions and influence of "place" and "space" (both inner and outer), globalization, ecological crisis, the validity of religious experience outside one's own tradition, scientific developments, and cultural currents are characteristic of the anthropological approach.

The anthropological approach to the study of spirituality focuses characteristically on the interpretation of Christian religious experience in the most adequate framework for generating responses to contemporary questions rather than historical or theological ones. For example, the scholar would probably be less interested in the history

or theology of mysticism in relation to social change than in how mystical experience interacted with political involvement in the non-violent teaching and practice of Martin Luther King, Jr, and how black preaching as rhetoric inaugurated ordinary oppressed people into that mystical-prophetic dynamic. In other words, was the Civil Rights Movement essentially a spiritual phenomenon, and, if so, how is it to be understood? Is the Christian character of King's non-violence essentially different from that of Ghandi? What do the answers to such questions imply about real social change?

Methodologies within an anthropological approach are virtually always interdisciplinary (not merely pluri-disciplinary), with different disciplines taking the leading role in different research projects depending on the researcher's primary question (Klein 1990). Whereas historical and theological approaches frame the questions raised about complex spiritual phenomena from the standpoint of those particular disciplines, the anthropological approach addresses the phenomenon in terms of what the researcher wants to know about religious experience, which may not be primarily historical or theological. Thus, for example, if the primary question is about the role of Martin Luther King, Jr's spirituality in his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, the point of entry may be his rhetorical appropriation in black preaching of Old Testament themes, and those themes might then become the framework for the analysis of the phenomenon.

The most congenial setting for the anthropological approach is the graduate research institution which allows and fosters but does not prescribe particular religious commitments and is not charged with the religious formation of individuals in a particular tradition or for particular ministries. Such a setting is particularly hospitable to this approach's interest in non-conventional questions, "marginal" phenomena, and the interaction of Christian spirituality with such contemporary concerns as feminism, cosmology, ecology, peace and justice studies, cultural developments, and so on.

The obvious contributions of this approach are its openness to investigating the widest possible range of questions, problems, and issues in the field of spirituality, its insistence on and ability to keep spirituality in the realm of public discourse, and its natural affinity with the postmodern agenda and sensibility. The challenge for those who approach the study of spirituality from the more anthropological perspective is to keep the specifically Christian character of the discipline in focus and to resist the postmodern lure of universal relativism, nihilistic deconstructionism, rejection of all tradition and authority, and suspicion of personal commitment.

Interaction of the approaches

Experience strongly suggests that these three approaches are not mutually exclusive or competing. Because all Christian religious experience is human and thus related to the spiritual enterprise of the human race, historically situated in a particular sociocultural and temporal setting, and rooted in the theological tradition of Christianity, all three approaches are necessary in respect to almost any question in the field. The approaches differ in the point of entry into a study, the specific interests that are paramount, the most appropriate methodologies, and the natural proclivities of the researchers. And, as already mentioned, different approaches tend to flourish better in

different academic environments. Historical approaches are probably most at home in the secular university setting; theological approaches in denominational settings concerned with ministerial preparation and formation; anthropological approaches in inter-religious graduate research settings. But the contemporary study of Christian spirituality is interdisciplinary by nature and fundamentally inductive and hermeneutical in methodology.

The Issue of Self-implication

The modernist conviction that research is an impersonal activity whose validity demands an objectivity equivalent to the "death of the researcher" is rejected today by most scholars, scientific or humanistic. Students fascinated by the human adventure with God need not disown their personal investment in their desire to study spirituality. And, as noted above, one's own spirituality provides empathic access to the phenomena spirituality studies. Spirituality, in other words, is intrinsically self-implicating. The question today among scholars in the field is not *whether* the personal religious experience of students plays a role in their work but *how* it can be appropriately integrated. This question has three foci. How can the student's experience function productively in research? What is the appropriate role of constructed experiences in understanding what one is studying? What is the experiential fruit of the study of spirituality?

The critical use of experience

Because spirituality is the study of experience which, by definition, is incommunicable as such, the analogous experience of the researcher is virtually necessary for understanding. Just as a psychologist who has never experienced fear, anxiety, or love will find it very difficult to understand emotional experience in her or his clients or in the literature of the field, so a person who has never experienced religious awe, temptation, prayer, or social commitment will have difficulty understanding (or even believing) the articulations of such experience in the "texts" (personal or literary) of spirituality. But just as one does not have to be schizophrenic to understand mental illness, one does not have to be a mystic to understand John of the Cross. In other words, it would seem that a person has to *have* a spiritual life to *understand* the spiritual life, and the deeper one's experience the more "understanding" one can be of the religious experience of others.

On the other hand, a researcher's personal involvement with the subject matter can be so intense that it can subvert the research. There is a certain kind of "objectivity" which must be methodologically cultivated to allow all the relevant data to be heard, weighed, and incorporated. For example, a homosexual person in a Catholic religious order studying the role of same-sex attraction in religious vocation would have to carefully control the desire to find such attraction virtually universal and spiritually superior to any other motivation for entering religious life. Indeed, such a finding would lead

to the suspicion that the researcher rather than the research has become the focus of the project. The desire to understand one's own religious experience can lend passion and focus to a research project, but research is the effort to understand what is really "there," not a projection of one's own agenda or the legitimation of one's own experience. The task of mentors is to help students to develop methodologies that will allow and validate personal involvement (i.e., the exercise and enhancement of subjectivity) but rigorously control the type of subjectivism that skews research.

Personal experience as data

The second question concerns the introduction of experiential material into the classroom study of spirituality. In a class on Christian prayer, is it legitimate or desirable to lead students in, or to assign exercises in, praying, or to require students to report on their personal prayer experience? Some maintain that such experience is integral to the praxis model which is most appropriate for studying spirituality (Liebert 2002). Others would encourage students to experiment, actually or vicariously, with what they are studying but would hesitate to require personal practice (as opposed to observation) and self-revelation which could encourage resistance or dissimulation. Still others believe that such experiences are artificial at best and manipulative at worst and have no place in the classroom.

There is probably no "one right answer" to this question. Some experience can be a form of research, that is, a practicum, such as attending liturgical events in order to understand worship as an experience, or dialoguing in spiritual counseling with different people about their experience of God. Such experiences may well affect students personally, but their primary purpose is access to otherwise unavailable data.

Students may also be motivated to certain experiences by their study. For example, studying meditation might move a student to make a retreat in order to experience directly what she or he is encountering in texts. The student's own experience then becomes an analogous "text" which increases empathic understanding of what is being studied.

Creating an experience so that students can study a topic through their own experience of it – for example, studying prayer by observing their own experience of praying – seems more problematic. There is no way to know that what students experience as prayer by following instructions supplies any significant data about prayer, even their own, and believing that it does may not be helpful to the student in understanding prayer in the Christian tradition. On the other hand, a carefully constructed experience might help students understand better the dimensions and contours of what they are studying and raise useful questions that engage the students more existentially in the subject matter (Frohlich 2001).

Again, context affects the answer to this question. Students in a Christian ministerial formation program may well expect and be willing to engage in exercises that increase their experiential base for dealing with others and foster their own spiritual life. College students with little or no experience of spirituality may find experiments with some of the standard practices of religion exciting, and such experiments may

facilitate their ability to talk about the subject. Students of various religious backgrounds (or none) participating in a graduate research seminar might find attempts to induce and/or structure their religious experience or require its revelation manipulative or even violent. As with any other subject in the curriculum, teachers must make prudential decisions about what, when, and how experiential material or methods should be introduced into a course in spirituality (Taves 2003).

The transformative potential of the study of spirituality

Finally, there is the question of the experiential impact of studying spirituality. Any serious personal engagement with "the other," whether social or intellectual, changes the subject. Real study, in other words, is transformative by nature (Weil 1951). Students who choose to study spirituality are usually personally involved in the search for God. What goes on in the seminar room and the library, in preparing examinations and writing a dissertation, is often profoundly transformative. Faith is stimulated, vocations are renegotiated, self-knowledge is deepened, appreciation of other traditions is broadened, commitment to service is consolidated. The quiet or dramatic interaction between study and personal growth is probably the most important aspect of the self-implicating character of the field of spirituality. As Socrates knew, one cannot wrestle with ultimate truth without becoming a different person. This is not a problem to be solved or a danger to be avoided but an effect to be celebrated.

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