

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

3.1 Introduction

'Spirituality' is a word which is in vogue today, not only within the church, but among people of all religious traditions, or those who do not belong to a recognised faith community. In many cases, people have rejected religion or the church, and sought to explore alternative forms of spirituality, whether from another religious tradition or from psychology, philosophy or self-help techniques. This is a major characteristic of contemporary Western society and literature, and one which the church, for the most part, has yet to address. Issues of spirituality are increasingly covered in the mass media, a development which reflects increased interest in spirituality in the general world population, whether associated with a traditional religious community or not (Waaijman 2002:1).

However, there have been many divergent understandings of the concept 'spirituality' in history, and attempts to describe what is meant by the term today are often inconclusive. The understanding of every generation of Christians is necessarily shaped by the historical, social and cultural environment (Sheldrake1998:40). Therefore, it is necessary for every new generation to redefine the meaning of spirituality for their time and context. This chapter will examine this historical background to the concept of spirituality, and contemporary influences which shape the understanding of spirituality today, in particular, the development of so-called *postmodernism*. Finally, the new development of spirituality as a distinctive academic discipline will be discussed.

3.2 The History of the term 'Spirituality'

The term 'spirituality' has been understood in a variety of contradictory ways. Sheldrake (1992:42ff) traces the development of the term 'spirituality' in church history. In view of its current popularity and influence, it is interesting that the actual term is not found in the Bible or earliest Christian writings. According to Sheldrake (1992:35), the term is not found in Christian writings until the fifth century, when Jerome exhorts the reader to 'advance in spirituality'. The Latin term *spiritualitas* attempts to translate Paul's term πνευματικός, 'spiritual' which refers to the influence of the Holy Spirit. When Paul uses

this term, he is referring to a person who lives a life empowered and controlled by the Holy Spirit. He is not talking about an aspect of life or human nature which is not physical.

However, later generations of Christians have been guilty of imposing this interpretation on Paul's writings, resulting in a distorted view of the physical body and the world. Paul has been misunderstood by many, who assume that his emphasis on the spiritual implies a disparaging of the body and of the physical world, or a semi-gnostic view, seeing the world as inferior to the world of spirit. For Paul, the distinction between *πνευματικός* and *ψυχικός* is between two ways of life (Collins 1996:78), not between two aspects of the human being. The spiritual person, the *πνευματικός*, is under the control of the Holy Spirit, whereas the *ψυχικός* is controlled by natural desires and human will, and has not submitted to God. The spiritual person "is *not* someone who turns away from material reality but rather someone in whom the Spirit of God dwells" (Sheldrake 1998:43).

3.2.1 The Influence of Monasticism on Spirituality

The development of the monastic movement in the third and fourth centuries had a profound influence on the spirituality of the church. The influence of monasticism spread far wider than those who were actually involved in monastic communities. Their lifestyle was a challenge to worldliness and corruption within the church and society. The early monks modelled themselves on biblical figures associated with the desert, such as Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist, and typically moved out into the desert, distancing themselves from the world and from an increasingly worldly church. The leading figure in this desert movement was Anthony of Egypt (c251-356 CE) (McGinn 2000:134).

The so-called Desert Fathers and Mothers are mentioned for the first time very soon after Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and their lifestyle was a protest against the resulting loss of commitment among Christians. They lived alone, coming together occasionally for common worship. In contrast, those who followed Pachomius formed the first monastic communities (McGinn 2000:138).

Besides the example set by these early monks, a major contribution of monasticism to spirituality was the preservation of ideas and forms of spirituality through the structures of monastic communities. McGinn describes this development as follows:

It was through the institution of monasticism that the mystical theories found in Origen, and those of Augustine and the other early Latin mystics, reached into the centuries to come. These spiritual systems, whether or not they were created specifically for a monastic context, soon became monastic (2000:131).

3.2.2 The Influence of Pseudo-Dionysius

The sixth century writer known to twentieth century readers as “Pseudo-Dionysius” played a formative role in the development of spirituality in the Western church. This writer was a monk from Syria who wrote using the name of Paul’s convert at Athens, Dionysius. He is most concerned how to achieve union of the human soul with God. “The theological centre of Dionysius’ concern is the exploration of how the utterly unknowable God manifests himself in creation in order that all things may attain union with the unmanifest Source” (McGinn 2000:161).

His teaching strengthened the position of the church structures as means of mediating between God and human beings. The Old Testament law prepared the way for “the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the New Testament era, which mediates between the materiality of the legal hierarchy and the spiritual reality of the angelic orders that form the celestial hierarchy. The ecclesiastical hierarchy is the human realm in which the proper interpretation of sacramental rituals performed by liturgists allows the various classes of believers to be divinized” (McGinn 2000:164). The goal, for Pseudo-Dionysius, was for a human being to become one with God, and in fact, to become divine. This, however, could not be done by the individual in isolation, but must be mediated through the structures and hierarchy of the church.

The church is believed to reflect the triune nature of God, so that “Each hierarchy comprises a level that perfects, one that enlightens, and one that purifies. And every hierarchy will also contain those who act, those who mediate, and those who are acted upon” (McGinn 2000:164). The three-fold order of bishops, priests and deacons is therefore also sacred – in the sacramental ministry of the church, deacons purify, priests illuminate and bishops perfect.

This triune hierarchy mirrors the celestial hierarchy. The first group of angels is perfectly united to God and consists of three groups: “the Seraphim as the source of light, the

Cherubim who pass it on and the Thrones who receive it” (McGinn 2000: 165). The second group of angels are the Dominations, Virtues and Powers, and the final group are the Principalities, Archangels and Angels.

Pseudo Dionysius taught that the nature of God can only be partly described using positive statements, saying who and what God is. Any statement about God will be partial, and therefore statements about what God is not carry the greater truth. For example, God is not a man, God is not subject to limitations of geography or knowledge, and in the ultimate sense, it is not possible to comprehend God completely. The purpose of seeking after knowledge and experience of God, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, is to reach divinisation, *theosis*, or union with God (McGinn 2000:179). However, he is more concerned with the objective nature of God than with human subjective experience (Sheldrake 1998:46).

Pseudo Dionysius built on the theories of the Neo-Platonists, especially Plotinus and Proclus, and Christianised their world view. In so doing, he introduced Neo-Platonic philosophy into Christian theology, and this has been an abiding influence into the twentieth century. Dionysius is known for coining the term “mystical theology”, understood as “the knowledge (or, better, “super-knowledge”) that deals with the mystery of God in himself” (McGinn 2000:171).

Moses is considered the ideal mystic, and those who wish to be united with God should strive to follow in his footsteps. First, Moses underwent purification (καθαρσις). He then experienced contemplation (θεωρησις) of the place of God, not the essence of God, that is, God as he is in himself. Finally, Moses achieved union with God (ενωσις) (McGinn 2000:172).

The theology/philosophy of Pseudo Dionysius is reflected in a popular hymn, which many congregations sing without understanding his terminology:

Ye watchers and ye holy ones
Bright Seraphs, Cherubim and Thrones,
Raise the glad strain. Alleluya!
Cry out, Dominions, Princedoms, Powers
Virtues, Archangels, Angels' choirs
Alleluya! (EH 1990: 451).

3.2.3 Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Developments

In the twelfth century, the tendency arose to separate spiritual life from academic theology. ‘Spiritual theology’ was classified as part of moral theology (Collins 1996: 79). The seeds of the understanding of the spiritual as something entirely separate from the physical or material were thus sown. At the same time, the increase of monastic influences in the church led to the majority of people to believe that the only way to be truly spiritual was to be a celibate priest or religious. “Male and female monastics came to be viewed as the ideal Christians, the religious virtuosi who combined ascetical self-mastery and the knowledge needed to attain God” (McGinn 2000:132).

The twelfth century development of the philosophical trend known as scholasticism also influenced the current understanding of spirituality, because a sharp distinction was made between spirit and matter, and between human beings and animals. ‘Spiritual’ was understood as connected to rationality, and this led to a distancing of immaterial mind or spirit from the material world. In the patristic period, generally all baptised Christians were believed to share in the spiritual life. In the Middle Ages, a gradual division developed between clergy and laity, who were considered less spiritual (Sheldrake 1998:45).

Sheldrake describes the more holistic approach to spirituality of the early period as follows:

Patristic ‘mysticism’ is neither abstract nor systematic. It refers to the personal life of the Christian who knows God as revealed in Christ by belonging to the fellowship of the ‘mystery’. This means the mystery of Christ as expressed in the Bible and the liturgy as well as in personal Christian living. Living the mystery begins with our incorporation into Christ in baptism and comes to fruition in us through the sacramental life and by growth in virtue. In this sense, all believers are mystics in that they are plunged into the mystery of Christ (Sheldrake 1998:46).

In this description, Sheldrake shows that the early Christians integrated their life, worship and teaching around their experience of Christ and relationship to him. There were no artificial divisions of, for example, work and worship, private and public life. The approach to the spiritual life was also more egalitarian than in later ages, when a more hierarchical approach to the church, its teaching and its spirituality had begun to develop.

Most of the early Christian writers were bishops, who wrote with a pastoral motivation. Their writings are therefore intended to teach their flocks, and to build the life of the church. Therefore, the meaning of the sacraments plays an important role in their writings and spirituality (Sheldrake 1998:47). Many of them were former monks, or they were closely associated with monastic communities, and therefore monasticism and spirituality are closely linked (Sheldrake 1998:48). They also, almost without exception, came from the upper classes of the Roman Empire. The result was “a grafting on to the biblical vision of Christianity of the humanistic values and traditional philosophical attitudes of the contemporary upper-class and male elites” (Sheldrake 1998:48). This description shows clearly that the prevailing theology effectively shut out those from the lower classes, those from other cultural backgrounds and women and prevented them from making a meaningful contribution.

During the twelfth century, the compartmentalisation of theology into different components began, so that spiritual or mystical theology was regarded as quite separate from doctrine, biblical studies, liturgy, etc. Thomas Aquinas divided his ‘Summa Theologica’ into clear parts, which became the pattern for later divisions of theology (Sheldrake 1998:49). Thus, a section dealt with God, a section with the church, with salvation as well as with moral theology, which came to include what today is understood as spirituality.

The Canons Regular of St Victor in Paris also exercised a major influence on the understanding of spirituality in the Western church during this period. Richard of St. Victor specialised in “spiritual theology” and was deeply influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius. He, in turn, influenced Bonaventure and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* (Sheldrake 1998:50). The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius is also seen in the development of mystics as a distinct group. Sheldrake claims that a related development was a new concentration on subjective spiritual experiences of individuals, both in the area of religious experience and in the area of romantic love. As a result, a new emphasis on the Song of Songs developed, with this book being understood as a symbol of the love between Christ and the church.

In the thirteenth century, a second group of semi-monastic movements began to arise. The mendicant orders and the beguines claimed that it was possible to live spiritual lives while carrying on everyday tasks and living everyday lives. Meister Eckhart was a major leader in this movement. This idea developed further during the Reformation, due to the promotion of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Luther, as a former monk, emphasised that people in all walks of life could live spiritual lives (Collins 1996:81).

In thirteenth century writings, such as those of Thomas Aquinas, both the original Pauline sense of the term 'spirituality', meaning under the control of the Holy Spirit, and the later usage meaning 'non-material' are found. Before this time, theology was based on reading and meditating on biblical sources. The scholastics "were concerned to develop a more systematic and precise method of research based upon the increasing availability of the Greek philosophy of antiquity" (Sheldrake 1998:48). The use of the term 'spirituality' to refer to the clergy originates at this time, and is found up until the sixteenth century.

3.2.4 The Early Modern Period

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the term 'spirituality' referred primarily to the clergy (Wakefield 1993:361). In the seventeenth century in France, the word began to be used in both positive and negative senses. The positive use described 'a personal, affective relationship with God' (Sheldrake 1998:43) while the negative sense referred to enthusiastic or quietistic movements, which had lost their connection to everyday concerns and social responsibilities. The definition of spirituality in the seventeenth century was two-fold: "the fostering of a distinct kind of life; on the other hand, it corresponded to the study of practical dogma which functioned in a normative way and thereby set the *Christian* parameters for the more general human spiritual experience" (Collins 1996:83).

In the seventeenth century, a deep interest developed in seeking Christian perfection, especially in France (Sheldrake 1998:53). The academic study of spiritual theology and mysticism developed, which included reducing aspects of the Christian life to precise definitions and categories. This was a logical outcome of understanding theology as a science. However, today it is questioned whether theology and Christian experience generally can be reduced to scientific or academic categories.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spirituality continued to be understood in terms of a distinction between ordinary life and a life of perfection (Collins 1996:83). However, Wesley brought about a significant difference of understanding, in that he did not understand spirituality as a subject of interest only to the clergy, but understood it as something to which all Christians could, and should, aspire.

3.2.5 Late Modern Developments

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the church has rediscovered the concept of spirituality, and broadened the earlier understanding to include all aspects of life. In a sense, the contemporary church has attempted to regain the Pauline understanding of the whole of life as being under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. However, it is still true that many people today speak of spirituality as the spiritual dimension of life, which is diametrically opposed to the material. It is also often used to refer to a person's prayer life and spiritual disciplines. While spiritual disciplines may include ascetic practices, such as fasting, spirituality cannot be opposed to material life and physical realities. In fact, spirituality is at the core of all human concerns, including views and actions in the social and economic areas, because spirituality determines values.

Spirituality was also formerly the domain of Roman Catholics and those on the 'high' (Anglo-Catholic) side of the Anglican spectrum. One effect of the broadening interest in spirituality outside the church has been that people of other denominations have been found engaging in retreats, forms of meditation and spiritual direction¹, whereas in earlier times these activities would have been less acceptable in protestant churches (Schneiders 1989:676).

Schneiders (1989:678) identifies three interpretations of the concept 'spirituality' in the twentieth century, describing them as follows: "a fundamental dimension of the human being, the lived experience which actualises that dimension and the academic discipline which studies that experience". Contemporary theology and philosophy has come to recognise that human beings have a dimension in their essential nature which makes them

¹ For example, the Rosebank Union Church, a non-denominational member of the Baptist Union of South Africa, has held an annual weekend retreat at St. Benedict's House, Johannesburg, for several years.

open to the transcendent, understood in a variety of senses². Humans have a need to live out their experience and understanding of the transcendent, and this experience can be the subject of academic study. Thus the reintegration of the study of spirituality with academic theology as a whole has been a distinctive, and very positive, development of theology in the twentieth century, continuing into the twenty-first century.

Spirituality may either bolster the status quo and thus be resistant to change, or it may work to change social, economic and political realities. Where spirituality is seen to support the status quo, it attracts antagonism from those who are anxious to bring about change in society. However, the power of spiritual movements to transform those who participate in them, and their contexts, is increasingly being recognised.

The broader approach to spirituality is a feature of contemporary Christian life and thought, and has led to a wider interest in spirituality, as well as the development of spirituality as an academic discipline within theology:

...the term no longer refers exclusively or even primarily to prayer and spiritual exercises, much less to an elite state or superior practice of Christianity. ...the term has broadened to connote the whole of the life of faith and even the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social, and political dimensions (Schneiders 1989:679).

There is a widespread recognition that spirituality is not elitist. It cannot be confined to the lives and practices of particular groups of Christians. All humans have a spiritual nature, whether they espouse a religion or not. The human spiritual nature is integrally connected with every aspect of their life and thought. In addition, it has become clear that “specific spiritual traditions are initially embodied in people rather than doctrine and grow out of life rather than from abstract ideas” (Sheldrake 1998:41). Thus, spirituality is expressed in daily life, and in the context in which a particular person lives.

In particular, one cannot divorce spiritual matters from the physical, material needs of others, their need for food, clothing, shelter etc. There is an urgent need in contemporary societies to recognise that social and economic factors are of necessity related to spiritual concerns. It is undoubtedly true that “...rice for myself alone may be unspiritual, but rice

²An interesting development has been the emergence of Neurotheology as a new sub-division of

for my hungry sister and brother is spiritual.”³ (Abraham 1994:3). It is not possible to seek spiritual truth while ignoring situations of economic deprivation. This is true for individuals and for the nations of the world. Spirituality is not only concerned with one’s relationship with God, but also with one’s relationships with other people, within the family, work environment, communities and church groups.

Spirituality is concerned with the person as a whole, with daily life and routines, as much as with prayer and spiritual disciplines. Spirituality has to do with integrating the spiritual and material sides of life, and expressing one’s relationship with God in everything one does and everything one is. Above all, a person’s spirituality should enable him/her to appreciate and enjoy God’s gifts in creation and especially in other human beings, and to enable others to enjoy them. While contemporary Western society has recovered a tolerance or even approval of spirituality, there is often a tendency to divorce spiritual concerns from politics or from business concerns. The contemporary church is faced with the task of helping individuals and groups to overcome the dichotomising tendency of Western culture. The church today is called to be an integrating force in society.

Spirituality must be relevant to its cultural, and social, context. As spirituality is intimately related to life and thought, it can never be divorced from the context in which life is lived:

... a living spirituality besides being based on a PRESENCE⁴, a Deepening Guidance, should be meaningful and relevant to the cultural, economic, political, religious and social contexts (Amoah 1994:52).

Spirituality concerns all interpersonal relationships, and particularly the out-working of our relationship to God in our everyday lives:

Spirituality spells our connectedness to God, to our human roots, to the rest of nature, to one another and to ourselves. Our spirituality is our experience of the Holy Spirit moving us and our communities to be life-giving and life-affirming. The Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered (Rom 8:26). We live our spirituality in creative response to the cry for life, the cry for God. We celebrate our spirituality in songs, rituals and symbols which show the energizing Spirit animating the

Psychology. Neurotheology studies the role of the physical brain structures in spirituality.

³ This statement originates from the Orthodox theologian Nicolai Berdyaev (Pobee 1988:449).

⁴ Capitals in the text

community to move together in response to God (Abraham 1994: 197).

Human life consists of a web of relationships, and if spirituality is concerned with interpersonal relationships, then clearly it is concerned with all aspects of life. In the passage quoted above, Abraham makes the important point that spirituality must be rooted in our experiences, particularly our experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Spirituality is the way we respond to the work of the Spirit, and the way we express this response, in work, worship, relationships and artistic expressions.

One's spirituality is a reflection of that which concerns one ultimately, or the central motivating factor(s) which govern life and lifestyle. Therefore, it may be concerned with traditional religious values, or it may focus on something very different, such as money, power, sex or success:

For many people, the term *spirituality* has otherworldly connotations and implies some form of religious discipline. The term is used...to refer to the ultimate values and meanings in terms of which we live, whether they be otherworldly or very worldly ones, and whether or not we consciously try to increase our commitment to those values and meanings (Griffin 1988:1).

A further development in recent years has been the emergence of an inter-faith approach to spirituality, arising from a recognition that spirituality is not unique to Christianity. Thus, many contemporary writers seek to utilise insights from, inter alia, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu spiritualities, or from secular philosophies. The strength of this approach is that spirituality draws from many sources, and becomes a broader approach to reality. The weakness is that it is easy to lose a distinctively Christian approach, and displace Christ from the centre of spiritual life.

For many contemporary popular writers, spirituality is assumed to be something separate from, and even opposed to, organised, institutional religion. This is reflected in many contemporary popular publications, and authors who profess to be spiritual and promote spirituality whilst separating themselves from the established churches, synagogues, temples, etc. However, it is important to recognise that spirituality and religion may be separate for some individuals and intimately connected for others. Spirituality is not, by its very nature, opposed to religion. Basu (1984:58) points clearly to the ambivalent

relationship between religion and spirituality, where religion may either facilitate communion between the individual and God or “loses its way in a plethora of rites and ceremonies and is encrusted by creed and cult”.

Many church groups have taken steps to facilitate exploration of spirituality by their members and adherents, including establishing groups which function under the auspices of denominational authorities, and producing literature and study materials. While this could be understood as a self-preservation technique, attempting to prevent church members from going elsewhere, it is also indicative of a widespread interest in different forms of spirituality and spiritual practices, and as such is a healthy development.

3.3 Contemporary Approaches to Spirituality

Recent scholarship has attempted to correct the individualistic leanings of much thought about the nature and practice of spirituality. It is imperative that we recognise the social dimension to spiritual life, which may be constructive or destructive, and the role of spirituality in society:

The foundation of all social energies – economic, political and cultural – is spiritual. Spiritual energies and social forms constitute a single whole. Spiritual energies are the deepest source of the legitimation or transformation of society (Holland 1995: 49).

Too often, Western Christians tend to see spirituality as the seeking of individual spiritual growth and development without reference to social transformation. Churches in non-Western contexts have much to teach the Western church about the recovery of the communal aspects of spirituality, and about drawing strength from spirituality in order to bring about transformation in the church and in the socio-political contexts in which the contemporary church exists.

It is important to note that spirituality can never be static. It is a process of constant growth and change. It is connected to, but distinct from, psychological development. At different stages of life, different approaches to spirituality may be more appropriate. This does not mean that earlier models are rejected, but that different forms meet the needs of a person or a group, at a particular time.

3.3.1 Spirituality and World View

The world view held by a cultural or social group is the view held by consensus among members of the group of their environment, including their relationship to other people, the world around them and the divine.

The transition from a modern to a postmodern philosophical framework⁵ which is taking place particularly in the West today, has meant a recovery for many of the religious aspect of life:

A basic failure of modern thought has been to underestimate the extent to which we are *religious* beings...we seek *meaning* (however unconsciously) ...by trying to be *in harmony with the ultimate nature of the world*, as we perceive it. Modern thought has suggested that religion was a mere transitory state, something we are now outgrowing (Griffin 1988:143).

Once again, religion and spiritual concerns have intellectual respectability. It is not assumed that only inadequate or immature human beings have religious beliefs. Religion and spirituality are not to be kept as private matters, divorced from everyday life. The trend towards privatising and marginalising spiritual experience, which began with the Enlightenment in Europe and the West and has dominated Western scholarship for the past two hundred years, is in the process of being reversed. It is generally acknowledged that spiritual values are at the heart of our decision-making process, although the content of these spiritual values varies greatly. “A basic aspect of postmodern consciousness is the recovery of the fact that our cosmology, our world view, inevitably determines our ethic, our way of living” (Griffin 1988:144).

Thus, there is an increasing recognition that the world view, including the religious beliefs and the spirituality, of both individuals and whole social groups has an impact on the lives of communities, nations and the world as a whole. Spirituality is not merely a private and subjective factor with no relevance to real life.

3.3.2 Spirituality and Science

One result of the development of the modern, scientific Western world view, was that knowledge was classified according to distinct academic disciplines, especially in

⁵ See 3.3.4 for a full discussion of this concept.

university environments. The effect of reducing all knowledge and meaning to empirical and scientific categories was an increasing fragmentation and loss of meaning for Western thinkers. As a result, the pendulum has now swung in the opposite direction, and Westerners are once more seeking a spiritual centre, which may or may not be connected to religion in the traditional sense of the term.

Fox argues that the present growing respectability of spirituality is a direct result of changes in the understanding of the structure of reality among scientists, in particular physicists since Einstein. “Anyone interested in spirituality today is powerfully indebted to what scientists are teaching about the universe, about our planet and about the interconnectedness of all things” (Fox 1999:141). Increasingly, there is a growing respect between scientists and theologians, and a recognition that both areas of scholarship have a valid contribution to make to the human search for meaning and significance.

Instead of seeing the world as overwhelmingly mechanistic, as a machine, without inherent value or meaning, we are beginning to see that the universe is not a series of discrete bodies, but an inter-dependent and inter-related field of energies. The world is more than a superbly functioning machine, and human beings are more than the sum of their body parts. Human life, and all life, is significant.

Einstein’s theory of relativity has had a major influence in present-day thinking and approach to reality, particularly in the once accepted distinction between the subject and object of study (Fox 1999:146). Present day researchers acknowledge that the researcher cannot be an objective observer of his/her subject, as, in the act of research, the researcher becomes part of what is researched. Science no longer claims that intellectual truths are value free and their use is not limited by moral values. In the light of the use made of science during the Second World War, both in the gas chambers and in the development of the atomic bombs, it is impossible to maintain a complete separation between science and morality.

3.3.3 Spirituality and Feminism

The consensus among those scholars who seek to understand and apply spirituality as an academic discipline is that “only a theology that is rooted in the spiritual commitment of the theologian and oriented toward praxis will be meaningful in the Church of the future”

(Schneiders 1989:677). Therefore, theology, spirituality and lifestyle are inseparable from one another. The integration of theology of life, and conversely the overcoming of the tendency of Western, patriarchal society to compartmentalise life, is closely associated with the feminist movement.

In the areas of theology and spirituality, many scholars link the attempts to overcome the physical-spiritual dualism as the result of the rise of feminism, and the recovery of the feminine aspects of spirituality:

Nature was symbolized by woman because she could not pretend so easily as man to escape. Woman, as the more visible partner in reproduction, remained the symbol of biological embodiment, of rootedness in nature, and of communitarian tradition. Man could pretend that he played no abiding role in reproduction and after fertilization could leave the rest to woman. The male symbol thus became the image of transcendence of nature – by military conquest, by construction of high civilization, and by the achievement of spiritual “heights”. Woman was thus seen as belonging to nature and man to civilization (Holland 1995:45).

A woman is less able to deny her physical nature, and her role in reproduction, than a man is. The philosophical assumption that men were separate from nature, and licensed to dominate nature through the development of culture and technology has always been closely linked to the assumption that women are to be dominated and controlled. The underlying idea that men are more spiritual than women is less obvious. Nevertheless, at least in the West, physical and spiritual domination of women has been closely linked to physical exploitation of the natural world.

The contemporary attempts to overcome dualisms and allow women to find their rightful place, and make their rightful contribution in both church and secular society, has contributed to the development of a more holistic approach to spirituality. This is a development very much still in progress, but it clearly holds promise for the future.

3.3.4 Modern and Postmodern Spirituality

The terms *Modern* and *Modernist* refer to a way of thinking which dominated in Western societies until recently. Carson (1996:21) describes *modernism* as follows:

In its most optimistic form, modernism held that ultimately knowledge would revolutionise the world, squeeze God to the

periphery or perhaps abandon him to his own devices, and build an edifice of glorious knowledge to the great God science.

Modernism is thus closely linked with secularisation, and with the deification of science, technology and the ideal of progress and development. It is also often combined with an optimistic view which assumes that all technological development is good or at least morally neutral.

In the past few decades, a new approach to philosophy and to reality has emerged in Western thought, in which the commitment to seeking 'objective truths', which undergirded Western thought since the Enlightenment, has broken down. Scientific proof is no longer the touchstone of truth, and even the notion that it is possible to prove a statement true for all time, has been questioned. The Enlightenment is generally seen to have heralded modern thought, and therefore, for want of a better term, the new way of thinking is termed 'postmodern'. *Postmodernism* reflects a search for a more holistic approach to life and to truth than the *Modern* approach.

Whereas the modern paradigm emphasised rationality, certainty and objectivity, postmodern thought is characterised by uncertainty and a recognition that no true objectivity or value free judgement is possible. The value of science was absolutised in the modern mind-set, and became almost deified. For postmodernists "science no longer plays the role of a hero that would lead us slowly toward full freedom and absolute knowledge" (Powell 1998:30). In the modern era, fact was radically distinguished from values or beliefs. In the postmodern era, people recognise that "no so-called facts are really neutral or value free, and that the line that used to divide facts from values has worn thin" (Bosch 1991:361).

Postmodernism has both positive and negative elements. The negative aspect is a tendency to deny the existence of absolute truth and to see all reality as without value and meaning. Smith states that postmodernism "began as a movement to question the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and human progress and has gone on from there to question all world views" (2001:89). While postmodernism has been hailed as a force able to liberate truth from the restrictions of Western science and philosophy, it has often done so at the expense of truth itself.

Ultimately, the existence of objective truths is denied or discounted. The approach to any text is governed by the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which does not question the objective truth of a statement, but rather asks what the speaker has to gain by believing the statement to be true. Thus, the core question is not whether a statement is true, but what the motivation of the speaker was. This approach has been influential in liberation theology and its sub-division, feminist theology.

The positive aspect of postmodernism is a new openness to the spiritual side of life, reflected in much popular literature in the 1990's, and reflecting the development of the so-called New Age Movement in the West. A related development is that contemporary people have come to accept unquestioningly the juxtaposition of radically different cultures, religions and value systems, with no thought of comparing them or judging one of greater validity than another. In fact, those who call themselves 'postmodern' typically deny the existence of an objective standard of truth (Carson 1996: 24) and of objective knowledge itself.

Powell gives the following tongue in cheek description of contemporary postmodern spiritual consumerism:

... you will find the Mysterious and Unknown sold in a thousand forms – psychic channelings of disembodied spirits, Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu meditation techniques, Native American sweat baths, crystals and herbs, electronic meditation machines and exotic potions (Powell 1998:2).

Part of the postmodern 'mind-set' is an insistence on pluralism as a necessity. This does not simply imply the existence of a multiplicity of faiths and philosophical options, but a celebration of this diversity. Guinness (1983: 92) speaks not only of pluralism but a pluralisation of ideologies. He defines pluralisation as "the process by which the number of options in the private sphere of modern society rapidly multiplies at all levels, especially at the level of world view, faiths and ideologies". Increasingly, religious beliefs are considered private matters, which any may choose, and none may impose on another. While on the surface, this is very positive, and enshrines the principle of religious freedom and tolerance, taken to extremes, it amounts to a ban on evangelism in any form, and a devaluing of religious truth claims.

The logical outcome of these ideas is a general denial of absolute truth or absolute values and norms. If all religious beliefs are asserted to be true, and some of these beliefs contradict one another, then logically none are true objectively. This development is a problem for many Christians, as it calls into question truth claims which have been accepted for centuries. Powell describes the post-modern relativist attitude as follows:

The ideas that the only God is Yahweh, or Allah, or the Goddess, ... or the scientific notion that the Moon is a physical body of such and such a mass that orbits the earth, ... or that Western Medicine is superior to Oriental herbalism, or that being feminine equals sugar and spice and everything nice, or that the Caucasian race is the master race – all these are man-made notions (Powell 1998:150).

It is interesting that accepted ideas within Western scientific and philosophical thought are put in the same category as religious beliefs. For the true postmodernist, all truth claims are relative, regardless of their origin or content, because there are no objective standards or universally acknowledged facts.

This has a positive message for traditional Christianity in that the modernist worship and exaltation of science and empirical knowledge is gone. The challenge inherent in this attitude, of course, is that the Church now has to enable its people to live in a pluralist world, and to present Christianity in a way which will enable postmodern thinkers to relate to it. Another challenge is presented by those who selectively read their expectations into various forms of spirituality, including African and Celtic Spiritualities, and attempt to impose their understandings on the rest of the church. The contemporary church needs to achieve a balance in learning from a variety of forms of spirituality, and using them to enrich its life and worship, while not allowing the relativism of postmodern and New Age thought to force itself onto the church.

3.4 Spirituality as an Academic Discipline

As mentioned earlier, the term 'spirituality' has had a variety of interpretations in the history of the church. In the post-Enlightenment age, with the privatisation of religion and personal spiritual experience, spirituality was relegated to the category of the unreal or inconsequential in the minds of many.

However, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a different approach to knowledge and scholarship has developed, described by Schneiders as follows:

In the late twentieth century, with the discovery of the serious limitations of scientific method in the humanistic sphere, the rediscovery of the power of symbolism and the ubiquity of metaphorical thinking and language, the development of a more adequate understanding of the constitutive function of imagination, and the raising of questions of language and interpretation in every field of investigation, a new appreciation of ancient biblical exegesis is also emerging (1996:19).

Schneiders sums up the development of postmodern philosophy and scholarship in three areas of human ability: first, science is dethroned from its central and normative position. It is no longer the norm of all knowledge, and can no longer claim to be the shrine and measure of objective truth. Secondly, human beings in a postmodern age have rediscovered the power of symbol, metaphor and imagination in communication and in aiding thought. Finally, there is a new recognition of the role of language and interpretation. Scholars can no longer claim immunity from subjective involvement in who or what is studied. In fact, it may be an advantage if a scholar admits his or her personal vantage point, as this will open the door to a more honest approach.

With the emergence of a post-modern approach to theology, scholars have begun to recognise spirituality as an academic discipline in its own right. Some scholars believe that spirituality should be a component of academic theology. Others, including Schneiders, have argued that spirituality is a discipline on its own, and is not subsumed by theology. This means that there is an interface between spirituality and theology, but not all spirituality can be classified as theological. This would set spirituality free to be more inclusive of other religions, that is, not to be exclusively Christian.

As it is once more acceptable, if not normative, to be involved in the pursuit of spirituality, and exploration of diverse forms of spirituality, so it is acceptable to engage in the academic study of spiritual thought and activities. The emergence of spirituality as an academic discipline is still in progress, and there is still considerable debate about its place in the curriculum and its subject matter. Some believe that it should be exclusively Christian, and others would like to see spirituality as something distinct from traditional Christian theology.

The very term 'spirituality', referring to a study of Christian spirituality, competes with terms such as 'spiritual theology' or 'mystical theology' (Schneiders 1989:684). The debate about the content of academic spirituality centres around its relationship to theology proper, and to other disciplines, especially psychology, sociology and anthropology. In addition, an institution offering the academic study of spirituality will have to contend with the relationship of Christian Spirituality with forms of spirituality found in other religions and philosophical systems. Spirituality, as an academic subject, is by nature interdisciplinary. Spirituality can only be understood if it is studied in conjunction with other subjects such as psychology, history and theology (Sheldrake 1998:40).

Schneiders (1989:689) proposes that spirituality should be seen as an autonomous discipline, alongside and not subordinate to theology. This would allow for a more open approach to spirituality as found in adherents of religions other than Christianity. It is undoubtedly true that spirituality as a concept is not limited to Christians, but is found in people of all major religions and philosophies. If spirituality is understood as a component discipline of Christian theology, then it becomes far more closely associated with Christianity than if it exists as a discipline separate from theology. However, for the present at least, spirituality is generally seen as a sub-division of theology in many teaching institutions.

3.5 Conclusion

It is generally understood today that spirituality is what concerns a person ultimately, whether this is seen in terms of religion, or in terms of something quite different, such as a focus on economics, social issues or personal pleasure. Spirituality is the set of core values, beliefs and aspects of behaviour, which make the life of an individual or a group meaningful. A spirituality may also have a legitimising force for a way or life or for the existence of a group. Alternatively, spirituality may involve challenging a series of accepted values, or the accepted way of life within a society.

The term 'spirituality' has evolved over several hundred years, and has been understood to have a variety of meanings at different times. Paul's understanding of the term 'spiritual' is that a spiritual person is under the control of the Holy Spirit. Later writers drew a false distinction between spiritual and material life, which was foreign to the biblical meanings.

Church authorities have vacillated between seeing the whole of Christian life as a unity and making a clear division between ordinary life and mystical experience. During the late middle ages and early modern period, spirituality was understood as a component of dogmatic theology, or moral theology. More recent theology has attempted to integrate different aspects of theology, so that hard and fast walls between academic disciplines are becoming more porous, allowing for more interaction and partnership.

The majority of forms of spirituality on offer in the West today do have a religious or quasi-religious nature, as a result of the unsettled psychological and economic climate and a widespread desire to seek meaning for life in alternative spiritual experiences. As discussed above, the transition from a modern or scientific world view to a postmodern philosophical climate has made interest in spirituality a socially acceptable concern. This does not mean that people are necessarily drawn back into religious communities in the ordinary sense of this word. Instead, a number of unusual traditions or spiritual techniques are presented, as if on a smorgasbord, for the perusal of the public. People are encouraged to try different options or combinations of religious traditions, and to adopt what 'works' for them. Adopting a form of spirituality may involve joining a community of like-minded people, but it may also be confined to individual beliefs or practices, without reference to other people.

Two of the competing forms of 'alternative' spirituality are Celtic and African spiritualities. They are both rooted in ancient cultures and belief systems, and represent a desire found in many contemporary Christians to return to their historic roots in order to find stability in a time of uncertainty and rapid change. The following chapters will examine these spiritualities in detail, and discuss their relevance for the church today.