

Spirituality and the University

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality and the University

It is not often that we witness the birth of a new discipline; the academy is slow to open its doors to “newcomers”. Yet, within the last few decades, we have seen the introduction of the “new” discipline of Spirituality into the revered corridors of higher education, not without some raised eye-brows from those within the established disciplines, in particular that of theology and religion. Spirituality is difficult to define and its inter-disciplinary nature does not allow for easy classification. There are diverse spiritualities, each one culture-specific, expressing its own historical, sociological, theological, linguistic and philosophical orientation. Post-patriarchal and telluric, contemporary spirituality affects all areas of society, and is a force for personal and societal transformation. The important role of the academy in this endeavour is increasingly coming to the fore. Spirituality can no longer be considered a “Cinderella” discipline; on the contrary, it has returned to its rightful place and is exerting considerable influence both within and outside the walls of the university.

1 INTRODUCTION²

Without doubt, “spirituality” is in high demand; it is no longer a phenomenon discussed quietly and reservedly in church circles, but has increasingly entered the public arena. It is no longer limited to clergy, religious workers, theologians and theoreticians of religion, but on the contrary is a topic of discussion in the health profession (McGinn 2005b:88); by psychologists (Hall & Edwards 2002); in business (Dollard, Marret-Crosby & Wright 2002; Lowney 2003); and in education (Alexander 2004) – to mention but a few areas of research. Sociologists, artists, political scientists and many others are

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2 Certain issues in the preliminary part of this article were first discussed in Kourie (2006a).

“tapping into” the resources of spirituality in every-day life. A conference on *African Spirituality*, organised by the *Spirituality Association of South Africa (Spirasa)* and St Augustine College: SA, in Johannesburg, January 2006, drew a large number of participants from the African continent and overseas. The second annual *South African Soul of Business* conference, held in Johannesburg, 2005, explored, inter alia, the value of African leadership and spirituality in the work-place. The British Society for Sociology of Religion hosted a conference in Bristol, United Kingdom (UK), April 2004, entitled *The Sociology of Spirituality*. The University of Aberdeen held a conference on *Integrating Spirituality into Healthcare Practices: Remembering the “Forgotten Dimension”* in January 2004. The list could be continued. Suffice it to say that spirituality has come into its own; publications in the field, both popular and scholarly, abound; courses on spirituality and retreats are in high demand; and centres for the study of spirituality have been instituted to cater for this growing interest. In addition to the foregoing, the academic study of spirituality has come increasingly to the fore, and will be the main focus of discussion for this paper. It addresses, inter alia, such questions as the following: What is spirituality in general? What is Christian spirituality? How is Christian spirituality taught in the Academy? What methodological approaches are best suited to the academic study of spirituality? What is the relationship between spirituality and theology? What is the relationship between spirituality and religion? How does spirituality contribute to personal and societal transformation?

2 ACADEMIC STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

The birth of the “new” (yet ancient) discipline of spirituality is one of the most exciting endeavours for those involved. We are reminded of the introduction of the disciplines of sociology and psychology just over one hundred and fifty years ago; we tend to forget that these disciplines had to find their niche in the academy, and as is the case with spirituality, not without opposition and apprehension from the establishment. Not a few intellectual eye-brows have been raised in the esteemed corridors of the university, as a result of the introduction of spirituality into the revered halls of theology faculties and departments of philosophy and religion!

In addition to new degree programmes in spirituality at university level³, new academic societies have arisen⁴ and specialised conferences on spirituality have been held⁵. Furthermore, new journals are now published to meet the growing interest in the academic study of spirituality⁶. Scholarly editions of ancient classics abound and there is a plethora of new publications in the growing field of spirituality. Waaijman (2007:1) speaks of the “explosion – in both lived spirituality and ... scholarly reflection” of the “global phenomenon” of spirituality, in contrast to the early twentieth century, where the “study of spirituality was almost completely restricted to the French catholic world”. This is particularly seen in the publication of the 25 volume Crossroads series *World Spirituality*⁷ and other recent publications⁸. A new web community,

3 Inter alia, London University, Heythrop College; University of Wales, Lampeter, University of California, Berkeley; Gregorian University, Rome; Radboud University, Nijmegen; Sarum College, Salisbury, UK; St Augustine College of South Africa, Johannesburg; Unisa, Pretoria, and most recently the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, which instituted a Masters degree in Biblical Spirituality (January 2008).

4 For example, the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (SSCS) founded at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, 1992; Spirituality Association of South Africa (Spirasa) founded 2004.

5 See in this connection, the conferences on Biblical Spirituality, Nijmegen 2007; and University of the Free State, 2008, in collaboration with the Titus Brandsma Institute of Spirituality, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. In 2004, the Milltown Institute of Spirituality, University of Dublin, hosted a conference entitled “With Wisdom seeking God: the academic study of spirituality in Europe” which drew scholars together, not only from Europe, but also from Africa, China and Australia.

6 *Studies in Spirituality*; *Spiritus*; *The Way*; *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 8, 2006: *The Spirit that moves. Orientation and Issues in Spirituality*.

7 This series, not yet completed, covers the indigenous spiritualities of Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and South, Central and North America; Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Sumerian, Assyro-Babylonian, Hittite, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian and Islamic spiritualities; esoteric and secular spirituality; inter-religious dialogue concerning spirituality; and a dictionary of world spirituality.

8 Cf Sheldrake, P (ed) 2005. *The New SCM Dictionary of Spirituality*. London: SCM Press; Holder, A (ed) 2005. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd; Waaijman, K 2002. *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters.

SPIRIN, (Spirituality International) under the auspices of the Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen, provides an “academic forum, multi-disciplinary in structure and multicultural in approach” in which “scientists, lecturers, students and professionals in the field of spirituality are given an opportunity to exchange information and engage in discussion” (Huls & Waaijman 2004:357)⁹. The multi-faceted nature of spirituality has been recently examined in depth by Waaijman (2007) in which he reflects in depth upon the inter-disciplinary nature of the academic study of spirituality. Drawing on the disciplines of theology, religious studies, philosophy, literary sciences, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, education, management studies, medicine, and natural sciences, Waaijman (2007:113) states that “... the study of spirituality will profit by a growing sensitivity for the dimension of relationality. Relationality is the inner dynamic of all processes of divine-human transformation. This understanding will place the phenomenon of spirituality, as presented in texts and histories, in a new perspective”. The question of inter-disciplinarity will be taken up below. Suffice it to say, for the present, that spirituality cannot be studied in isolation. It impacts on the totality of what it means to be human. Bearing this in mind, a short definition of spirituality in general and Christian spirituality in particular is now offered.

3 DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

Many definitions of spirituality abound; it has become an umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities, ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre. Its popular usage covers all sorts of beliefs and values, and its usage is often imprecise. It is helpful, therefore, to have a working definition that will encapsulate the essence of spirituality, particularly as the phenomenon of spirituality has such a firm grip on the contemporary psyche. Waaijman (2002:1) describes spirituality as that which touches the core of human existence, namely, “our relation to the Absolute”, however the latter may be defined. Spirituality can be seen as the concern of all who feel drawn to the “fullness of humanity” and is “the capacity of

9 This forum comprises six inter-connected areas: Who’s Who; Bibliography; Forum; Encyclopedia; Education; Bulletin Board & Links; for further information on this exciting ICT network, see Huls J & Waaijman K 2004. Spirituality International (SPIRIN). An Academic Community. *Studies in Spirituality* 14, 355-370.

person to transcend themselves through knowledge and love ... and become more than self-enclosed monads” (Schneiders 1986:265; 2003:165). It refers to the deepest dimension of the human person, whether religious or non-religious, and presupposes a life that is not isolationist and self-absorbed, but rather characterised by “self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (Schneiders 1986:266; 2005c:16). Such an approach is anthropological, focusing on the human dimension of spirit. In addition, and important for the present discussion, is the fact that the term spirituality “... is unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience” (Schneiders 1989:678).

One of the reasons for the increased interest in spirituality is undoubtedly *postmodernism*.

Postmodernism, following Griffin (1988:x-xi; cf 1990) can be classified either as: *deconstructive*, or *eliminative*, in which the modern world-view is overcome by an “anti-world-view” – deconstructing such concepts as God, self, purpose, meaning, etcetera, leading to relativism and nihilism; or *constructive* or *revisionary*, in which there is a “new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions ... [and] support for the ecology, peace, feminist, and other emancipatory movements of our time”. A recognition of “the ambiguous and multifaceted character of human consciousness” and the fact that “the human person is not self-contained but internally constituted by a whole range of relationships” leads to the desire to find meaning in the midst of fragmentation (Lesniak 2005:8). As such, constructive postmodernism has immense significance for present-day spirituality, particularly in its emphasis on the inter-connectedness of all of life, human and non-human. Postmodernism represents a *gestalt* shift, or epistemological transformation, which, without denying the very real benefits of the scientific and technological advances of modernism, nevertheless is open to the mystical, the spiritual and the aesthetic (Kourie 2006a:6, 8).

Spirituality is not necessarily linked to *religion*. There are many who cannot align themselves with traditional religion. In the West, many church structures are evaporating, organised religion is in decline, and there is a clear process of secularisation, and disengagement of society from religion. Some of the reasons for this

state of affairs can be seen to be as follows: firstly, a fanatical intolerance among some religious groups who are totally committed to an ideology with the result that purely humanitarian feeling and ethical behaviour are ignored; secondly autocratic systems of religious governance, which do little to encourage critical thought; thirdly, the use of Scripture as “law” instead of life-giving, sustaining and nourishing; fourthly, the treatment of women in many religious groups as second-class citizens; and fifthly, hierarchical divisions which have contributed to an élitism unacceptable to twenty-first century women and men. As a result, one could speak of a certain “allergy” towards religious and ecclesiastical institutions due to their dogmatic or practical intransigence (Kourie 1998:438). Institutional religion can lead to “empty ritualism, hypocrisy, clericalism, corruption, abuse of power, superstition, and many other deformations familiar from the history of religions and from which no religion is totally free” (Schneiders 2003:171). As such, this leads to disillusionment and jettisoning ties with organised religion. In an age of secularism and agnosticism, true spirituality may be the way forward for these contemporary women and men who espouse a ‘secular spirituality’ (Van Ness 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Kourie 2006b)¹⁰.

Nevertheless, although the established religious traditions do not exert a strong appeal for a large number of people, religion and spirituality can be partners, and not necessarily rivals; spirituality can be a source of renewal for religion and the latter can prevent spirituality from becoming rudderless and isolated (Schneiders 2003:176). A complete rejection of religion can be attributed in many cases to the fact that there is a failure to see the reality behind the institution, and thus is likened to curing a headache by decapitation (Schneiders 2003:171).

10 See in this connection, *Implicit Religion: Journal for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality*, available via Equinox Publishing: <http://www.equinoxpub.com> The 30th Denton conference on *Implicit Religion*, Yorkshire, UK – May 2007, celebrated its 30th year of studying the role and manifestation of religion outside the realm of established religious institutions.

Bearing the foregoing in mind, we turn now to *Christian Spirituality*¹¹.

4 CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Christian spirituality, in certain circles, has for far too long been identified with asceticism, denial of the “world” and an anti-materialistic philosophy of life. Often an over-emphasis on self-denial has the *opposite* effect, namely an over-concentration of self, which precludes real growth and full maturation. Fortunately, in recent decades a more acceptable understanding of spirituality has arisen which is not dualistic and world-denying. McGinn (1985:xv-xvi) offers a brief working description: “Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialised forms It is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in Christian consciousness and practice.” Schneiders (2005c:17) clearly states:

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 him or her a child of God.... The contemporary discipline of spirituality ... 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.

Contemporary spirituality impacts on the totality of life: it is non-dualistic, encompassing the entire life of faith, without bifurcation between sacred and secular (Kourie 2000:13). Clearly, the letters of Paul do not posit a dichotomy between the incorporeal, or non-material, and the corporeal, or material. For Paul, the *spiritual* person is one whose life is nourished and directed by the Spirit of God; the *carnal* person is one whose life is diametrically opposed to the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit is the enriching power that

11 References to “spirituality” in the remainder of this paper will refer to “Christian” spirituality, unless otherwise specified.

heals, invigorates, vitalises and transforms the follower of Christ. Fruits of the Spirit are seen in the lives of the believers (Gal 5:22-23); sin no longer rules (Rom 6:12); believers are encouraged to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:6), “live in the Spirit” (Gal 5:25), and “speak in the Spirit” (1 Cor 14:2). To be a “Spirit-person” is the essence of spirituality. Moltmann (1997:68,69) speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “source of energy and the divine field of force”, a “vitalizing energy”, a “flowing, an outpouring and a shining ... the source of life, the origin of the torrent of energy”. These and related themes will be taken up in the final section of this paper, dealing with spirituality and transformation.

For present purposes, it will be helpful to survey briefly the history of the *term* “spirituality” and secondly, the history of the *discipline* of spirituality.

5 HISTORY OF THE TERM ‘SPIRITUALITY’

As is well known, the word “spirituality” comes from the Latin *spiritualitas*, which is related to *spiritus* and *spiritualis* – used to translate *pneuma* and *pneumatikos* in Paul’s writings. Paul, in turn relied on the Old Testament role of the spirit (*ruah*) of God. The interpretation of spirituality in the Pauline sense, as described above, continued to hold sway throughout the early centuries of the church, with explicit mention in Pseudo-Jerome in the fifth century (Epist 7; PL 30:114D-115A, in Principe 1993:931) in the admonition, “So act as to advance in spirituality.” However, by the twelfth century, a change occurred in which spirituality was seen in *opposition* to the corporeal or material. Philosophical developments in theology brought about an understanding of the term “spiritual” as that which refers to “the intellectual creature in contrast to non-rational creation” (Schneiders 1986:258; Sheldrake 1992:35). Further developments in meaning occur in the thirteenth century, in which the juridical sense of “spirituality” as that pertaining to the clerical estate; those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction were called the *spiritualitas* or “lords spiritual” in contrast to those exercising civil jurisdiction, the *temporalitas*, the “lords temporal” (Principe 1993:931). Although the earlier religious understanding of spirituality was still present, alongside the more philosophical interpretation, the predominant usage from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, was that pertaining to the clerical state. In the seventeenth century, spirituality reappeared in its religious form, however, not without controversy. In France at this time,

“spiritualité” in its positive sense referred to the devout life, expressing a personal, meaningful and affective relationship with God (Principe 1993:931; Sheldrake 1992:35). In addition, due to the concern caused by the enthusiastic and quietistic movements of the time, the term was used pejoratively and was condemned as being “too refined, rarefied and separated from ordinary Christian life” (Sheldrake 1992:35). As a result of these negative connotations associated with spirituality, diverse terminologies appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example: “devotion”; “perfection” (in John Wesley and the early Methodists); and “piety” (among Evangelicals). In the eighteenth century, the term was hardly used by Roman Catholics, and in the nineteenth century the word “spirituality” referred mainly to free religious groups not affiliated to the mainline churches (Sheldrake 1992:36). In the twentieth century, spirituality re-appeared, no longer in a negative sense, but as a comprehensive term relating to the fullness of Christian experience. This usage has continued into the twenty-first century, and “spirituality” is now the term used not only by Christians but by adherents of other religions, by secularists, and even by Marxists (Principe 1993:931; cf Sheldrake 2007:4).

Allied with the foregoing, a brief look at the history of the *discipline* of spirituality will help elucidate its present position in the academy, particularly due to the fact that in many quarters spirituality is still considered a “Cinderella” discipline!

6 HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE OF SPIRITUALITY

With respect to the historical influences on the academic discipline of spirituality, the following observations may be made. Firstly, the early study of theology was a *unitary* endeavour; the various modern divisions in the theological field as we know them today did not exist. Theology comprised “exegetically based interpretation of scripture for the purpose of understanding the faith and living the Christian life” (Schneiders 1986:260) and was essentially an intellectual-spiritual pursuit (Schneiders 1989:685). Waaijman (2006:1) refers to writings as early as the year 200 CE which deal with “practical works, the most important aim of which is the promotion of the personal life of Christians”. The Bible was the primary source of all reflection and the scriptural commentary the most common genre, with the result that Christian knowledge was a synthesis of “... biblical exegesis, speculative reasoning and mystical contemplation” (Sheldrake 1992:38). Theology was faith

seeking understanding, “it was also understanding seeking transformation, the transformation of self and world in God through Christ in the power of the Spirit” (Schneiders 2006:199). Clearly, this referred “... primarily to the global and integrated enterprise of living the spiritual life, meditating on the Bible as scripture, thinking clearly and faithfully within and about the tradition, practicing personal prayer, celebrating liturgically within the believing community, and living the Beatitudes that Jesus preached. The theologian was defined as one who prayed truly” (Schneiders 2006:199). In the thirteenth century, with the rise of city culture in Western Europe, the rise of the university and the emergence of conceptual systems derived from philosophy, theology and spirituality began a process of separation (Waaïjman 2006:1). This was exacerbated by the positioning of spirituality in Part II of his *Summa Theologia* by Thomas Aquinas. As a result, spirituality, or what came to be known as “spiritual theology” became a subdivision of moral theology, which in turn drew its principles from dogmatic theology. Allied to this apparent “demotion” of spirituality, is the fact that although there were writings by some “mistresses” (cf Schneiders 1986:261) of the spiritual life, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), theologians were primarily men, who continued the scholastic tradition of Aquinas. Sheldrake (1992:40) takes this point further, in his claim that there 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 élites”. In the seventeenth century that branch of dogma dealing with the principles of the spiritual life came to be classified as “ascetical theology”. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the spiritual life became the object of study and teaching, and as the “science of the life of perfection”, it was called “spiritual theology”. It comprised two sub-divisions: “ascetical theology”, as noted above, and “mystical theology”, the former relating to the life of perfection in its active or pre-mystical stage, and the latter relating to the life of perfection subsequent to the onset of passive mystical experience (Schneiders 1989:686). The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed the “new” discipline of spirituality which is in the process of being liberated from “its tutelage to dogmatics” and is broadened “to include the whole of the human search for self-transcendent integration and authenticity” (Schneiders 1989:689). Thus the nomenclature “spirituality” is preferred to the “historically freighted” term “spiritual theology” (Schneiders 1989:689).

Although this brief historical survey hardly does justice to the subject at hand, nevertheless, it has hopefully helped position spirituality as a discipline in its own right. “Spirituality”, since it does not carry the theological “baggage” associated with the term “spiritual theology”, as discussed above, lends itself to “comparative and cross-traditional inquiry and dialogue” (Schneiders 1989:690). This will be taken up further in the discussion of methodology; suffice it for now to welcome the emancipation of spirituality and to accord it its rightful place in the academy of the twenty-first century.

By way of summary, Christian spirituality impacts on the totality of everyday life; it is non-dualistic and holistic, effecting change at cognitive, volitional and affective levels of the person. Spirituality recognises the fullness and complexity of the human being. It has come a long way and speaks to us from the corridors of history: freed from deterministic categories, it allows a fresh approach both in terms of the lived experience itself and also the academic discipline. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to a short analysis of *how* the discipline of spirituality is studied in the academy today.

7 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

As noted, earlier, spirituality can denote the actual experience of self-transcendence, whereby life is lived according to the ultimate values and commitments upon which we base our lives; and in addition, it refers to “... the field of study which attempts to investigate in an interdisciplinary way spiritual experience as such, i.e., as spiritual and as experience” (Schneiders 1989:31). Such “spiritual experience” refers not only to religious experience in the strict sense of the word, but also “those analogous experiences of ultimate meaning and value” which impact on individuals and groups in a life-giving and authenticating manner (Schneiders 1989:31). In order to bring clarity to the investigation of the above, certain methodological principles need to be elucidated.

The seminal work of Schneiders (1986:31-35; cf 1989; 1993; 2005; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2006) with respect to the study and methodology of spirituality leads to the following preliminary observations: firstly, this endeavour is interdisciplinary; secondly, the investigation is inclusive of “non-religious” experience; thirdly, this academic study is “descriptive-critical rather than prescriptive-

normative”; fourthly, it is “ecumenical, cross-cultural and holistic”; fifthly, a “three-dimensional” approach is advocated, namely a *descriptive* phase, in which historical, textual and comparative studies are undertaken, followed by an *analytical* and *critical* phase, resulting in both *explanation* and *evaluation*, with the help of the theological, human and social sciences. The final phase is *synthetic* and/or *constructive* and leads to *appropriation*, and is governed by hermeneutical theory.

The question of *appropriation*, *self-implication* or *transformation* will be taken up shortly, in the concluding section of this paper; suffice it to mention at this stage that such a methodological tool should be a *sine qua non* in the study of spirituality. Perhaps at the risk of incurring scholarly rebuke, given the “objectivity” of the academic enterprise, I would venture to say that the study of spirituality cannot be a merely disinterested exercise; it impacts upon the researcher, teacher and pupil alike. More of this later.

8 ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHOD

The *anthropological* method has been succinctly advocated by Schneiders (1989:693; 1993:13; cf 2005c)¹²:

Essentially, the anthropological approach takes as its starting point neither the theological tradition that informs or governs Christian spirituality experience nor the historical record of spirituality experience but the spirituality intrinsic to the human subject as such. In other words, it is the anthropological structures and functioning of the person as a subject called to self-transcending integration with an horizon of Ultimacy which raise and shape the questions and suggest the appropriate resources for the study of spirituality. Spirituality does not characterize us primarily as Christians but first of all as humans.

(Schneiders 1993:13)

12 In a later work Schneiders (2005:49 - originally published in 1994) re-articulates her own approach as “hermeneutical” rather than “anthropological”, due to certain misunderstandings which accrue to the latter term.

Such an approach is interdisciplinary (the value of which has been noted above) cross-cultural and inter-religious. The researcher is open to a variety of approaches, inter alia, psychological, sociological, feminist, liberationist, ecological, pluralistic, literary, artistic, humanistic, in addition to biblical, religious and theological (cf Downey 1997:128; Waaijman 2007). Klein (1996:19) writes as follows regarding boundary crossings:

John Higham describes the academy as a “house in which the inhabitants are leaning out of the many open windows gaily chatting with the neighbours, while the doors between the rooms stayed closed” A great deal more, in fact, is going on. Some are happily chatting, some are arguing with their neighbours, and others have fallen out of the windows. Many doors remain closed. Yet other doors have been broken down, and in some cases entirely new buildings have been constructed.

(in Berling 2006:37-38)

Although “internal heterogeneity” and “boundary crossings” reflect the new “internally diverse” situation, nevertheless the institution changes very slowly, and in practice university departments still reflect a strong compartmentalisation, in spite of “porous boundaries” (Berling 2006:37, 38).

Schneiders (2005a:8) delineates two “constitutive” disciplines: *scripture* and the *history of Christianity*. These are constitutive “because they supply the positive data of Christian religious experience as well as its norm and hermeneutical context”. These two fields provide the necessary background, context and basic training for studies of Christian spirituality. Berling (2006:40) adds, correctly, a third constitutive discipline, namely *comparative religions*. The latter supply important comparative data and analytical categories that enhance the understanding of Christian spirituality. Thus Christian spirituality builds upon or borrows extensively from the disciplines of biblical studies, history of Christianity and comparative religions. Therefore, “Biblical studies, history of Christianity, and comparative religion all become ‘constitutive disciplines’ in so far as they supply positive data and

the hermeneutical contexts for understanding Christian Spirituality” (Berling 2006:41)¹³.

A broad range of what Schneiders (2005a:10) calls “problematic’ disciplines” so called because of the problematic of the phenomenon being studied, are included in the academic study of spirituality. Schneiders invokes the model of “problem-based interdisciplinarity” – which arises from team-based interdisciplinary projects – often in the social sciences or the health field (Berling 2006:42). An example of this would be research determining the effect of meditation/prayer on patient recovery, utilising scientific methods of analysis, bio-feedback, etcetera.

Of necessity, this more open-ended approach will demand more of the researcher than the more commonly accepted methods, namely the *historical* and the *theological* approaches.

9 THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The *theological* method has deep roots in Christianity, and has been noted in the historical survey, proponents of this method often use the term “spiritual theology”, instead of “spirituality”. At the root of this approach is the emphasis on the central doctrines of Christianity, for example, the Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, the sacraments, etcetera, and their normative role for judging the authenticity of spirituality (Downey 1997:124). Theological approaches, by their very nature, are less open to inter-disciplinarity, and tend to concentrate on “theories, concepts, principles and obligations”; they run the danger of allowing “theological presuppositions to unduly dictate and restrict spiritual experience or the understanding of spirituality” (Downey 1997:124). No doubt, theology can be a means of clarification and support, and even provide challenges and correction, in addition to the fact that a theological method is more easily followed in seminaries, nevertheless it runs the danger of once again subsuming spirituality instead of recognising it as an equal partner (Downey 1997:125). Certain dangers have to be clearly avoided, for example, the notion that spirituality is “theology done right”, namely, with the engagement of head and heart; and as a

13 Berling (2006:410 – quoting Klein 1996:88) refers to “the burden of comprehension” in the act of borrowing. “At the very least, the burden of comprehension requires a ‘basic understanding of how something is used in its original context’.”

“corrective to a rationalistic and desiccated abstract theology” (Schneiders 2006:198). It is important, in this era of greater clarity concerning the relationship between spirituality and theology to avoid “conceptual slippage¹⁴” which prevents true debate.

Theology attempts to interpret the texts and traditions of Christianity in critical dialogue with the culture in which it is lived today, realizing that theological discourse is itself part of culture and therefore not fully separable from it. It seeks what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons between the Christian faith tradition as thematized in theological loci and the cultural situation in which that tradition is lived and of which it is a part. The academic discipline of spirituality ... is also a hermeneutical enterprise. It seeks to interpret concrete and individual instances of the living of Christian faith as these are mediated to us in particular texts, practices, art objects, and so on. It seeks a fusion of horizons between the world of the scholar and the individual phenomenon being studied (Schneiders 2006:207).

A position of reciprocity and critical correlation between theology and spirituality is the preferred approach.

10 HISTORICAL METHOD

The *historical* or what has been called *historical-contextual* method (McGinn 2005a:33) has clear advantages in that it centers spirituality in the historical rootedness of the particular tradition, and its linear

14 Schneiders (2006:197-200) uses this term to describe the problems associated with the lack of precision when the terms “theology” and “spirituality” are not carefully defined according to specific usage. For example, theology can be seen as “restrictive” or “exclusive”, namely systematic theology, “under which cluster a number of subdisciplines such as trinitarian theology, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, moral theology, and so on...The other meaning of theology, much broader and more inclusive, refers to all confessionally committed religious studies within the Christian tradition ... [inter alia] systematic theology ... biblical studies, church history, pastoral ministry studies, practical theology, world religions, comparative theology, ecumenical theology, theology and aesthetics, and a number of other areas of enquiry”. Christian spirituality would fit into the latter, but not the former. Likewise, spirituality can mean either “the lived experience of the faith” or “the academic discipline which studies that lived experience”.

and organic development. Examination of the documents or texts which describe a particular spiritual experience, or movement or person, remind us of the continuity which binds us to the past. This helps prevent a sense of isolation in the study of spirituality; the experience of those who have gone before can help “enlighten, instruct, guide, challenge, or validate our own” enabling a greater appreciation of the process of history (Downey 1997:126; Sheldrake 1992). The importance of *tradition* cannot be overlooked: “... the place of history in the study of spirituality is a reminder of the positive power of religious-spiritual ‘tradition’. Without some sense of tradition, an interest in spirituality lacks something vital that can only be gained by a renewed attention to historic Christian spiritualities that have had such an influence, explicitly or covertly, on Western culture” (Sheldrake 2007:9-10).

Notwithstanding its value, however, the historical method also has its limits. “Spirituality ... must cast the net wider [than history] because of the recognition that Christian spiritual experience is not reducible to the history of Christian spirituality as this is expressed in historical texts” (Downey 1997:127). Although an understanding of history is a pre-requisite for the scholar, nonetheless, there are “many realities in the sphere of spirituality ... which ... are essentially transhistorical or outside the proper sphere of the discipline of history” (Schneiders 2005:55). Schneiders continues in this vein in her assertion that:

One can study the conditions leading up to a conversion experience, the observable conditions of the experience itself, and its publicly available results including first or third person accounts of the experience. But can one study, historically, the conversion experience itself? Or mystical experience as such? Or transformation as religious or spiritual experience? It seems to me that historical study, while indispensable as a participant in the study of the spiritual life, is not the defining method.

11 HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

Schneiders (2005:57) posits the *hermeneutical* method as a preferable approach, not in the sense of applying a particular hermeneutical theory, or agenda, but rather as a process of description, critical analysis and constructive interpretation, leading to “appropriation that is transformative of the subject”. The question

of “appropriation” will be taken up below, when dealing with spirituality and transformation; for present purposes, it is worthwhile to refer to Perrin (2007:41) for further clarification:

Hermeneutical theory refers to techniques used to tease out the message and meanings that are not immediately obvious in all sorts of human activity. Hermeneutics, or interpretation, can be applied to texts, human actions, events, or artistic productions – all aspects of human life. Human life does not speak for itself; it needs to be *interpreted*....Hermeneutics gets around the prejudice of where, when, and how God is present in the world by being open to investigating all phenomena within their own parameters of meaning.

Schneiders (2005:56-57) delineates three steps in the hermeneutical process: Firstly, a *description* of the particular phenomenon or phenomena under investigation. This will involve textual witness, historical facts, political, sociological and psychological elements, etcetera, where relevant. Secondly, *critical analysis* will be undertaken. Such analysis would involve, inter alia, theological criticism, and inter-disciplinary analysis, depending on the object under consideration. Thirdly, *constructive interpretation* is of vital importance as, in the words of Schneiders (2005:57): “The objective of the study of spirituality is not simply to describe or explain the spiritual experience but to understand it in the fullest sense of that word”. This involves “not only intellectual deciphering of a phenomenon but appropriation that is transformative of the subject, what Ricoeur calls expansion of the being of the subject”. This does not detract from the *cognitive* factor in the academic study of spirituality. Intellectual reflection and research are primary; nevertheless they are not divorced from lived reality in the present. Whilst the academic study of spirituality differs from *formative* programmes (the latter often conducted in seminaries, retreat centres or departments of Practical or Pastoral Theology) nevertheless, the importance of “interiority¹⁵” in academic endeavour is crucial.

15 Frohlich (2005:75) draws on Lonergan (1990:14-17) with respect to understanding “interiority”: “For Lonergan, interiority is an appropriation of one’s own experience, in which intimacy precedes and grounds objectivity. The primary goal of interiority is not self-objectification but self-appropriation –

The self-implicating nature of spirituality, as already noted, in no way precludes the academic rigour necessary for research in the academic field of spirituality. Such research aims:

To understand, theoretically and practically, the lived experience of God and try to clarify this phenomenon in all its multiplicity and uniqueness and power ... [it is] concerned with the conditions of possibility of such experience, its actual occurrence, the variety of religious experience, the structure and dynamics of such experience, the criteria of adequacy of such experiences, the effect of social context and theological milieu on religious experience in literature, art, and social construction, and so on.

(Schneiders 1993:12)

The only difference between such scholarship and that of other human sciences or even natural science is the fact that scholars of spirituality investigate the “actual human experience of God rather than a purely ‘natural’ phenomenon, such as a social movement, or chemical reaction” (Schneiders 1993:12).

12 PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD¹⁶

Waaijman (2002:535) considers a “*dialogical-phenomenological*” approach to be the best scientific method for analysing spirituality, since, “Phenomenology is ... a method of working ... that is focused on experience and the internal examination of experience” and a

that is enhancement of the self-presence that is the ground of all presence – with what is other.”

16 Phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) arose as a reaction to the naturalist view in which reality was seen as essentially objective. A result of this positivistic approach was the exclusion of the subjective aspect of reality from in-depth consideration at an ontological level. Phenomenology emerged to obviate the problem of uncritical equation of objectivity with reality. Epoche and eidictic seeing are the means by which this method can be implemented, the former relating to the suspension of presuppositions with respect to the phenomenon under consideration; the latter relating to the intuition of the essence of things. A further aspect is the fact that the phenomenological approach aims to perceive and describe how people experience themselves in their own life-setting, namely the intentionality involved. This avoids the danger of imposing alien and inappropriate concepts on the phenomena under investigation.

dialogical approach is important because it “posits the principle of alterity: that which is other, the other and the Other”. Utilising form-descriptive, hermeneutic, systematic and mystagogic tools of research, Waaijman (2002:599) aims at integrating the phenomenological approach with that of dialogical thought and vice-versa. A major element of the phenomenological method is that it is expository, analytic and synthetic as opposed to polemical and argumentative (Kruger 1982:ix). As such, it is well suited to the investigation of spirituality. Given the nature of our scholarly endeavour, it is certainly important to maintain academic rigour and objectivity, nevertheless, as mentioned throughout the discussion thus far, the personal and subjective nature of this research cannot be minimised.

By way of summary, methodological postulates are but tools, not the final destination for the scholar of spirituality. Particularly with respect to the subject under investigation, both intellectual interpretation and intuitive understanding are essential. A phenomenological, rather than a confessional approach to the academic study of spirituality effects an open mind, whereby different spiritualities may be examined non-judgementally. For this reason, Endean (1995:91-92) suggests that an approach, from within a religious studies perspective, rather than a theological perspective, is helpful as it is conducive to inter-religious dialogue.

As mentioned during the course of the present discussion, “appropriation” is of the utmost importance in any study of spirituality. In other words, what is the “telos” of such academic endeavour? This is now briefly considered in terms of personal and societal transformation.

13 SPIRITUALITY AND TRANSFORMATION

As we draw the threads of this discussion to a close, it is important to step back and ask ourselves, why are we studying spirituality? What has brought us to the shores of this new terrain? What hopes and aspirations do we bring to this adventure? As we explore questions of definition, issues of methodology, etcetera, are we perhaps in danger of over-rationalisation and systematisation? Just as spirituality has brought a breath of fresh air into the often arid and technical theological systems – will we soon be looking for some new approach that will help enliven spirituality? Let us hope that we do not fall into such a trap! De Villiers (2006:100) discusses an

interesting development in this respect, namely, criticism of the critical mind itself! In a critique of contemporary philosophy and theology, he points out that “rationality and the critical mind in itself can obtain and display a negative character More than mere critical, rational thinking is needed to think and live meaningfully” (De Villiers 2006:102). It is acknowledged that theology itself has freed itself in many areas from its stereotypical past, particularly with the rise of contextual theologies; nevertheless, just as with philosophy, traditional western theology has lost “its dynamic, transformative nature” and indulged “in debate about irrelevant dogmatic or exegetical issues” (De Villiers 2006:105). Spirituality, as a new and vibrant discipline has helped liberate theology, and in turn, effect transformation at a personal and societal level. Writing of the transformative potential of the study of spirituality, Schneiders (2005c:31) writes:

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.

With respect to *personal* transformation, Christian spirituality leads to a mystical transformation in Christ, a *Christification*, whereby the words of Paul in Galatians 3:20 become a reality: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Paul, the mystic, reveals God’s secret wisdom, and manifests Christ as a “radically new facet of the divine personality, thereby making known the possibility of an essentially dynamic union with the Risen Jesus” (Stanley 1977:11). This union has social implications and is inextricably linked to the church, and thus has collective and cosmic meaning (Kourie 1998:442). Tabor (1986:9) in his exegesis of Romans 8:29 refers to a mass apotheosis in Paul’s message, and a new cosmic family as a result of the salvific event in Christ. The mystical initiative comes from God; it is both an act of grace and also effected in the historical actuality of Christ:

“Human mysticism, as attraction, knowledge and experience of God, is always preceded ... by a divine mysticism as attraction, knowledge, and experience of the human by God ...” (cf Phil 2:7; Gal 4:9; Penna 1996:249). Such mystical transformation leads to a higher level of living, and ethic of love that is encapsulated in the poem of 1 Corinthians 13 (Kourie 1998:445). This christification leads, in turn, to what the early mothers and fathers of the church call “deification” or “Theosis”, based on 2 Peter 1:4, the invitation to become “sharers in the divine nature¹⁷”. Eastern Orthodoxy has not neglected the doctrine of *Theosis* as has the western church, and sees it as a gift of God. The incarnation of Christ serves as paradigm and exemplar for his followers: Christ’s transfiguration points to the transfiguration of deified humanity (Kourie 1998:451). Christification encompasses not only imitation of Christ, but also living the very life of Christ in the Holy Spirit. This effects complete transformation and “a *politeia*” of theosis flows into every aspect of one’s being (O’Keefe 1994:52) and indeed of society. Clearly, we are dealing here with a mystery that cannot be encapsulated in words; it is important to bear in mind that “deification” is not a scientific term, but a metaphor, an artistic expression, “... which tries to hint at a transcendent fact utterly beyond the powers of human understanding and therefore without equivalent in human speech” (Underhill 1961:418).

Appropriation at a personal level leads to the ethical endeavour which changes not only the individual but also impacts upon *society*, leading to an “integrated spirituality”. Avoiding dualistic approaches to life, an integrated spirituality helps effect transformation of social structures and alleviate the ills which continue to afflict humanity

17 The concept of deification occurs frequently in the patristic texts. Clement of Alexandria states,

“God’s Logos has become human that humankind might be able to grasp how it can attain to being God” (Protrepticus 1.9, in Pannikar 1989:193, n 39). This central Christian doctrine has unfortunately been relegated to obscurity, due to the fear that it might promote pantheism. See also in this connection, Inge (1899:356-372) “The doctrine of deification”, Appendix C. This excellent article points out the differences between the Greco-Oriental and the Latin approach to deification. In addition, the article by Meyendorff (1989) ‘Theosis in the Eastern Christian tradition’ brings this doctrine to the fore.

(Kretzschmar 2000:41). As such, one lives “publicly” – not abandoning society – but serving all those in need. In the words of Sheldrake (2005b:290), “... to live publicly means letting go of a life focused on the survival of the autonomous self... [it] excludes social or political quietism, it excludes existing passively in the midst of the world. Interaction, participation, and active citizenship thus should be seen as forms of spiritual practice”. Spirituality, therefore, forms the basis for any apostolic endeavour and societal transformation.

The foregoing is but a brief excursus into the “telos” of Christian spirituality. Experience of teaching Christian spirituality has shown that students and teachers alike are not just objective observers, but deeply committed to the exciting task of researching and implementing life-changing truths. Tuition and research is itself a life-enhancing activity. Although the academic rigour is exacting, the “energising” effects of this research flows into one’s life and ministry.

14 CONCLUSION

We cannot deny that problems still exist in the academy with respect to the new discipline of spirituality. The study of “experience” still sends shudders through some esteemed professorial bodies! Nevertheless, the academic study of spirituality continues to gain ground, and attracts large numbers of quality students with a wide variety of research interests. Serious and critical engagement with the subject matter of this new discipline continues to grow, and exciting new areas of discourse are opening up to scholarly analysis. Its vocabulary is developing; primary resources and research tools are now more readily available; academic societies are providing a forum for exchange of ideas; and scientific journals in the field are of a high standard. The study of spirituality is increasingly facilitating productive interchange between global spiritual traditions, an interchange which is of benefit to all parties concerned. We are witnessing a renewal of interest in perhaps what is one of the oldest traditions in human history, namely, the transmission of spiritual wisdom. Interest in spirituality is an indication of a deep-felt desire within the hearts of women and men to find unity and wholeness, both individually and in society. Contemporary spirituality is no longer concerned primarily with the inner processes of the human being, but also with the very real needs of present society, including the need to preserve the planet. Christian

spirituality is not deracinated from earthly concerns, but fully embraces the phenomenal world. Post-patriarchal and telluric, spirituality is reclaiming its position in society and in the academy, and as such, will contribute to a global transformation of consciousness. The University has a role to play in this endeavour, a role that is increasingly becoming clearer as former attitudes of isolation and suspicion give way to openness and inter-disciplinary exchange.

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