Introduction to Christian Spirituality, part I

CS 501
Houston Graduate School of Theology

Christian Spirituality

According to your text (15), Bernard McGinn, in his contribution to the first volume of the Christian Spirituality Bulletin, noted that he discovered around 35 different definitions of “spirituality.”

Our task will be to uncover a few of these definitions.

Then, during the semester, each of you will work on a definition that describes your current understanding of the term.

Alister E. McGrath

The quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.

McGrath

The way in which the Christian life is understood and the explicitly devotional practices which have been developed to foster and sustain that relationship with Christ.

A set of beliefs, i.e., creeds, statements of faith
A set of values, i.e., loving others, denying self
A way of life, i.e., expression of beliefs and values

Ronald Rolheiser

Spirituality is, ultimately, about what we do with [our] desire. What we do with our longings, both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us, that is our spirituality.

Augustine . . . said: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Spirituality is about what we do with our unrest.

Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds, and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others, and the cosmic world.
Central to any spirituality is its conception of what is ultimately real (40).

Christian spirituality is Christian only to the extent that it retains its specifically Christian religious character—it partakes of a specific story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without it, Christian spirituality becomes just another name for moral development, an instantiation of the natural life (61).

Spirituality refers to human interaction with the transcendent or divine. Within the Christian tradition, it refers specifically to relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Thus . . . Christian spirituality says something about the character of an individual’s or a group’s relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Christian spirituality is a way of connecting the finite with the eternal through maturing relationships with God through the Christ, with others, and with self.

Where does the term come from?

- *Spiritualitas* (Latin) - Introduced to the West as a translation of the Greek adjective *pneumatikos* (spiritual; from *pneuma*, “spirit”).
- In the 17th and 18th centuries - spirituality came to be used synonymously with “devotion,” “piety,” and “religion,” the latter two gaining a somewhat negative connotation.

How is spirituality distinguished from spiritual formation?

- Spiritual formation is a God-ordained process that shapes our entire person so that we take on the character and being of Christ himself.
Spiritual formation is concerned with the hidden dimension of every human life, the space God has given us to become the person we choose to be. (Richard Foster)

**Spirituality informs the choices.** When we are open and responsive to the process, our outer life becomes an expression of this inner formation.

### The “subsets” as defined by Evan Howard

- **Spiritual Formation** - the means by which growth is fostered in the Christian life
- **Mysticism** - the exploration and conscious experience of the divine presence
- **Spiritual Theology** - the science of the development of Christian maturity

### Key words

- **Balance** - reflects the many-faceted nature of spirituality
- **Attention** - reflects the importance of paying attention to and understanding self in relationship with God

### Balance

- A comprehensive spirituality stresses a balanced approach to the cultivation of the spiritual life. It recognizes that true spiritual growth consists of rightly balancing life, ministry, activities, etc.
- A **coherent theology** is needed to develop a consistent spirituality that is contextual with global expressions, evangelical or true to the story of Christ, and charismatic or unpredictable and surprising.

### By paying attention...

- We want to uncover the hiddenness of our own spirituality and train our spiritual eyes to see into and beyond the hiddenness of the spirituality of self, of others, and of God.
Spirituality, according to Chan

The basic accent of the Christian spiritual tradition is on overcoming the hindrances to becoming the person God sees, not on developing one’s natural, creaturely potential.

Spiritual progress is viewed primarily from the perspective of restoring the image of God rather than from the perspective of developing innate human potential.

Howard’s full definition blends with Gire’s

1. To study or “Read” at the level of academic discipline
2. To formulate a teaching or “Reflect”—a way of understanding the dynamics of how relationship with God works
3. To live it out or “Respond”—the practices lived out in relationship with God

Windows of the Soul

Ken Gire said that we’ve all had moments when we’ve experienced something of intimacy with God.

At some of these windows, what we see offers simply a moment of insight, making us slower to judge and quicker to show understanding.

At a few of them, what we see offers a word spoken to the very depths of who we are.

Spiritual Formation Exercise

READ - Pay attention outside by looking, listening, and noticing what is going on outside of yourself (10 minutes)

REFLECT - Come back inside and take 10 minutes to reflect on the moment.

RESPOND - What will you do as a result?

Model of Spiritual Formation

Especially as it applies to Scripture

Reading the Moment - Text, topic, context

Reflecting the Moment - Understanding the message

Responding to the Moment - Application of principles to discipleship