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# A Brief History of Spirituality

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*To Susie*



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# Preface

The subject of spirituality is now an important academic field, not least in the English-speaking world. New journals have begun, university courses have developed, and an increasing number of people also study the subject in more informal ways. Spirituality has become a word that defines our era. Certainly a growing interest in spirituality is one of the most striking aspects of contemporary Western culture, paradoxically set alongside a decline in traditional religious membership.

When I first discussed this book with Rebecca Harkin at Blackwell Publishing, it became obvious that it would be far too complex to attempt a brief history of *spirituality in general*. The spiritualities of the major world faiths differ in significant ways from each other. It was decided to limit the scope of the book to Christian spirituality but this does not imply exclusivity. It is simply an attempt to control a vast topic by setting clear limits.

Even so, to write a brief but reliable history of Christian spirituality is risky – particularly for a single author. How do you encapsulate two thousand years in a short space without

reducing matters to names, dates, and superficial generalizations? The only realistic answer is to select only some personalities, traditions, and themes. The result is inevitably subjective but I hope it is also reasonably balanced. The book follows a broadly chronological framework blended with thematic elements that are highlighted as particularly characteristic of an age. In recent years for teaching purposes I have also found it helpful to identify four major paradigms of Christian spirituality. I call these “the monastic paradigm,” “the mystical paradigm,” “the active paradigm,” and “the prophetic-critical paradigm.” These are identified in the pages that follow.

Sadly in such a brief volume it proved impossible to do proper justice to the great riches of both Western and Eastern Christianity. After the early Christian centuries the book concentrates on Western Christianity while summarizing aspects of the East where possible.

The introduction addresses the question “what is spirituality?” The historical treatment begins with a chapter on the scriptural and early Church foundations of spirituality and summarizes the key features of Christian spiritualities. Chapter 2 discusses the “monastic paradigm” of spirituality and the reasons for the relative dominance of monastic ways of life in the period up to the twelfth century. It also briefly discusses the divergence of Eastern and Western religious cultures and its impact on spirituality. Chapter 3 charts major shifts in spirituality between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries particularly in relation to the re-emergence of cities – especially the movement of spirituality outwards from the cloister and the emergence of a more subjective “mystical paradigm.” This chapter ends with an epilogue that looks towards the Reformation. Chapter 4 explores the age of the Reformations and the breakdown of Western “Christendom” from the mid-fifteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. The period also sees the dominance of a third form of spirituality, what I call “the active paradigm,” with its emphasis on finding

God in everyday life and in the service of other people. Chapter 5 covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially the encounter between Christian spirituality and the intellectual Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. The final chapter explores the twentieth century and the response of spirituality to the impact of challenges to traditional religious worldviews symbolized by the figures of Marx, Darwin, and Freud and by the horrors of two World Wars and mid-century totalitarianism. During this century a fourth form of spirituality emerges based on the growing attention to issues of social justice. I call this the “critical-prophetic paradigm.” The book concludes with a short epilogue that briefly asks what are likely to be some of the critical trajectories for Christian spirituality in the twenty-first century.

I have been teaching spirituality for almost thirty years to graduate students and in adult education contexts on both sides of the Atlantic. This book is really a distillation of these experiences. So, first of all, I want to thank all the students I have taught for the stimulation they provided. My own researches have also been greatly helped by thought-provoking conversations with colleagues and friends – particularly in the international Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Warm thanks are also due to my present colleagues in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham for providing a friendly environment to work in. Thanks also to Louise Spencely for editing this book and to all the staff at Blackwell. This book is dedicated as always to Susie whose partnership, love and continual conversations about what spirituality means have been the greatest support and stimulation of all.



# Introduction: What is Spirituality?

In her classic work, *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill suggests that human beings are vision-creating beings rather than merely tool-making animals.<sup>1</sup> They are driven by goals that are more than mere physical perfection or intellectual supremacy. Humans desire what might be called spiritual fulfillment. For this reason, an enduring interest in spirituality should not surprise us.

## *Contemporary Meaning*

The contemporary use of the word “spirituality” is sometimes vague and difficult to define precisely because it is increasingly detached from religious traditions and specifically from its roots in Christianity. The sharp and unhelpful distinction often made between “spirituality” and “religion” will be briefly addressed at the end of this book. Yet, despite the fuzziness, it is possible to suggest that the word “spirituality” refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people

seek to live. In other words, “spirituality” implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential.

Commentators sometimes suggest that the current interest in spirituality reflects a subjective turn in contemporary Western culture. It therefore tends to focus either on individual self-realization or on some kind of inwardness. There is considerable justification for this assertion in consumerist “lifestyle spirituality” that promotes fitness, healthy living, and holistic well-being.<sup>2</sup> However, at the beginning of the new millennium there are also signs that the word “spirituality” has expanded beyond an individualistic quest for meaning. It increasingly appears in debates about public values or the transformation of social structures – for example, in reference to health care, education, and more recently the re-enchantment of cities and urban life.

“Spirituality” has a more defined content when associated with historic religious tradition such as Christianity. In fact, Christianity is the original source of the word although it has now passed into other faith traditions, not least Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> In Christian terms, spirituality refers to the way our fundamental values, lifestyles, and spiritual practices reflect particular understandings of God, human identity, and the material world as the context for human transformation. While all Christian spiritual traditions are rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and particularly in the gospels, they are also attempts to reinterpret these scriptural values for specific historical and cultural circumstances.

## Origins of the word “spirituality”

The origins of the word “spirituality” lie in the Latin *spiritualitas* associated with the adjective *spiritualis* (spiritual). These

derive from the Greek *pneuma*, spirit, and the adjective *pneumatikos* as they appear in Paul's letters in the New Testament. It is important to note that "spirit" and "spiritual" are not the opposite of "physical" or "material" (Greek *soma*, Latin *corpus*) but of "flesh" (Greek *sarx*, Latin *caro*) in the sense of everything contrary to the Spirit of God. The intended contrast is not therefore between body and soul but between two attitudes to life. A "spiritual person" (see 1 Cor 2, 14–15) was simply someone within whom the Spirit of God dwelt or who lived under the influence of the Spirit of God.

The Pauline moral sense of "spiritual," meaning "life in the Spirit," remained in constant use in the West until the twelfth century. Under the influence of the "new theology" of scholasticism, influenced by Greek philosophy, "spiritual" began to be used to distinguish intelligent humanity from non-rational creation. Yet the Pauline and the supra-material senses of "spiritual" continued side by side in the thirteenth-century writings of a theologian like Thomas Aquinas. Interestingly, the noun "spirituality" (*spiritualitas*) during the Middle Ages most frequently referred to the clerical state. So "the spirituality" was "the clergy." The noun only became established in reference to "the spiritual life" in seventeenth-century France – and not always in a positive sense. It then disappeared from theological circles until the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century when it again appeared in French in reference to the "spiritual life." It then passed into English in translations of French writings.

The use of the word "spirituality" as an area of study gradually re-emerged during the twentieth century but it was only by the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s that it began to dominate and replace older terms such as ascetical theology or mystical theology. The emergence of "spirituality" as the preferred term to describe studies of the Christian life increased after the Council until it was the dominant term

from the 1970s onwards. First, it countered older distinctions between a supernatural, spiritual life and a purely natural everyday one. Second, it recovered a sense that “the spiritual life” was collective in nature rather than predominantly individual. Third, it was not limited to personal interiority but integrated all aspects of human experience. Fourth, it re-engaged with mainstream theology, not least biblical studies. Finally, it became an area of reflection that crossed the boundaries between different Christian traditions and was often a medium for ecumenical growth. By the end of the twentieth century this had extended further into the wider ecumenism of interfaith dialogue.

### *Spirituality and History*

Christianity is essentially a historical religion for the central doctrine of the Incarnation situates God at the heart of human history.

By affirming that all “meaning,” every assertion about the significance of life and reality, must be judged by reference to a brief succession of contingent events in Palestine, Christianity – almost without realizing it – closed off the path to “timeless truth.”<sup>4</sup>

Christian spirituality affirms “history” as the context for spiritual transformation. Even Augustine’s future-orientated theology of history, one of the most influential Christian historical theories, did not render contingent history meaningless even if it distinguished between sacred and secular “history.” While he rejected a progress model of history and believed that no age could be closer to God than any other, the thread of sacred history ran through human history and every moment was therefore equally significant.<sup>5</sup>

In approaching the relationship of spirituality and history, a fundamental factor is how we view the importance of “history” itself. Western cultures these days sometimes appear weary with the notion of being involved in a stream of tradition through time. It is not uncommon these days for people to believe that history signifies only the past – something interesting but not critical to our future. “Tradition” is perceived by some people as a conservative force from which we need to break free if we are to live a more rational existence. The desire for immediacy encouraged by consumerism also produces a memory-less culture. Perhaps the most powerful factor during the twentieth century has been the death of a belief in history as a progressive force. This evaporated in the face of two world wars, mid-century totalitarianism, and the horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima.

Despite contemporary doubts, a historical consciousness is a human necessity. It reminds us of the contextual nature and particularity of spiritual values. Indeed, attention to the complexities of history has been a major development in the study of Christian spirituality over the last thirty years. One reason why the study of Christian spirituality now pays greater attention to the complexity of historical interpretation lies in an important change of language associated with the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. The phrase “signs of the times,” coined by Pope John XXIII and repeated in the Council documents, effectively recognized that history was not incidental to, but the context for, God’s work. Faith is not opposed to history, and no separation is possible between religious history and world history.<sup>6</sup>

Spiritual traditions do not exist on some ideal plane above and beyond history. The origins and development of spiritual traditions reflect the circumstances of time and place as well as the psychological state of the people involved. They consequently embody values that are socially conditioned.

For example, the emphasis on radical poverty in the spirituality of the thirteenth-century Franciscan movement was not simply a “naked” scriptural value but a reaction to particular conditions in society and the Church at the time – not least to what were seen as their prevailing sins.<sup>7</sup>

This does not imply that spiritual traditions and texts have no value beyond their original contexts. However, it does mean that to appreciate their riches we must take context seriously. Context has become a primary framework for the study of spiritual traditions. Spirituality is never pure in form. “Context” is not a “something” that may be added to or subtracted from spiritual experiences or traditions but is the very element within which these find expression.<sup>8</sup> This contradicts an older conception of Christian spirituality as a stream of enduring truth in which the same theories or images are simply repeated in different guises.

### *Interpretation*

If we take context seriously, yet also seek to approach spiritual traditions from other times and places for the spiritual wisdom they contain, questions of interpretation arise.<sup>9</sup> We are inevitably aware of different cultural and theological perspectives when we read a text from another time or place. If interpretation is to serve contemporary use, we cannot avoid the question of how far to respect a text’s assumptions. Certain responses are naive. We may ignore the author’s intention and the text’s structure entirely and simply pick and choose as it suits us. The opposite extreme is to assume that only the author’s intention matters. Even assuming that we can accurately reconstruct this, such an approach subordinates our present horizons to the past. Both approaches assume that the “meaning” of a text is simple. A more fruitful, but more