

Christian Spirituality

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Following an outline of the history of the term, this article presents a definition of Christian spirituality as the human response to God's call. It describes the various forms of this response, whose foundation is the double commandment of love, and the many ways in which spirituality can be lived out in everyday life. Regularity, community, spiritual guidance, and discernment of spirits are identified as requirements for a sustainable spiritual practice in everyday life. Certain problems are then singled out, including the need to choose one's own form of spirituality within the complex context of late modernity and the ambiguity of the concept of experience. Finally, spirituality is framed as a basis for ecumenical community.

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Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. History of the Term

The term "spirituality" does not originate from the Bible, where we find only *spiritalis* (translation of πνευματικός). The noun is found in Latin texts from the 5th century onwards. In its modern sense, however, "spiritualité" was first used in

the 17th and 18th centuries in the theology of the French Dominicans. The Council of Youth (1974, communauté de Taizé) initiated its interdenominational dissemination. Since the 1980s, the meaning of the term has become increasingly vague (New Age, corporate spiritualities, inclusion of the spiritualities of different religions).

2. Definitions

Broadly speaking, unspecified experiences of unity can be described as spirituality, as can a wide variety of experiences of transcendence, an effort to transcend oneself in order to achieve self-realization, or the orientation of one's life toward the "one" or the "ultimate." In a narrower sense, spirituality is a concrete *praxis pietatis*, a specific form of lived faith. The concise and specifically Christian definition that forms the basis of the sections below is the following: Spirituality is the loving relationship between human beings and God and the world that is brought about by God in this world, a relationship in which human beings continually shape their lives anew and which they take responsibility for in a reflective manner. In this sense, it is to be understood as an individual's active response to God's Word, to an experience of God's presence, a conscious response that involves an individual's life as a whole. Spirituality is lived faith and, at the same time, reflection on it.

3. Human Responses to God's Call

In the history of spirituality, different types of responses can be found, but they all have one thing in common: people want to experience God more deeply and in ever new ways on the paths they have taken. Some people retreat into solitude and immerse themselves in silent prayer, while others live in a community that they consider more important than themselves and in which they experience God in shared faith and everyday life. Some withdraw inwardly because they assume that, on the path of sanctification, they are drawing ever closer to God, that they are becoming more and more like God ("theosis") and therefore can find God within themselves. Others go to those in need and recognize Christ in their suffering neighbors (Mt 25:31ff.). In these different ways, they all strive to lead a life that enables them to draw closer to God. As a Christian response to God's call (i.e., as spirituality), the path of Mother Teresa ^{GND} and that of a monk on Mount Athos are equally as valid, as are a piety that is politically engaged and the ascetic withdrawal of mystics, or, especially in Protestantism, a spiritual practice of everyday life, i.e., a faith lived out in one's profession and family. Even those who experienced God as distant and silent (John of the Cross ^{GND}, Thérèse of Lisieux ^{GND}) continued to search. They may have found their search futile, but they still held fast to God. People have taken very different paths, sometimes also in different phases of life. There is no single, correct path.

4. An Essential Foundation for Shaping Christian Spirituality

This foundation is given to all Christians through the double commandment of love in Matthew 22:37–39: We should love God and our neighbor as ourselves. The double commandment thus constitutes an "anthropological triangle," a triangle in which every human being stands. The first corner is God. The second corner is the other person, the other living being, the fellow creature, whom I become a neighbor to through my actions. The third corner is my own self, which finds itself in the world. An essential challenge for a spiritual life and for a spiritual configuration of everyday life is the maintenance of a balance between these corners. This remains the task on all possible spiritual paths. Given that this balance cannot be sustained permanently, an unstable equilibrium is attainable at best. Time and again, people forget their own needs in their efforts to help others; time and again, people forget the needs of others and their devotion to God in their pursuit of self-realization. In order to achieve this equilibrium again and again, daily attention is required, as is regular self-examination – a constant striving to achieve balance with the knowledge that a new beginning is possible at any time, for God wants us to live in love (1 John 4:16), constantly calls us to do so, gives us the strength to do so, and forgives us for our failures.

5. Ways of Life

In whatever form it comes in, spirituality enriches life, gives it a firmer foundation, provides moments of calm amid the stresses of work and family life, and gives us the strength to get through difficult times relatively unscathed. But how do I find the right path for me, the spiritual method that suits me? Even within Christianity alone, the wealth of the spiritual tradition is vast. Possible options include: active commitment to one's own parish, conscious participation in the liturgical life of the Church year, observing daily times of prayer or Bible reading, meditation on Scripture or an icon, church music activities and bibliodrama, fasting and pilgrimage, participating in times of silence and daily prayers during a stay at a monastery or on retreats, diaconal engagement and joining one of the numerous communities, the practice of confession, and reading the Herrnhut Watchwords. In the end, the form is not decisive.

6. What Does a Spirituality Need That Can Sustain Us in Everyday Life?

Whatever approach an individual may adopt, the experience of many generations of spiritual practitioners suggests that four things are indispensable:

1. Regularity in practicing the chosen spiritual method and perseverance in maintaining it. Only those who have become accustomed to a form of spirituality can naturally fall back on it in difficult times. But that means: I need a regular, preferably daily or weekly practice, and that is why I stick to it even when it is not enjoyable or does not provide a special experience. A sustainable spiritual experience does not arise from an "event" or from constantly trying out new approaches.
2. Community. God has directed us toward others for the purpose of mutual care and love, for sharing life. Even an intense individual prayer practice is no substitute for coming together as the community of Jesus Christ, for the strength and comfort that a community provides.
3. Spiritual guidance or counseling. People on the path of spirituality time and again need encouragement, clarification, guidance, in brief, a word from outside. For such a word to be spoken and heard, a relationship of trust must have developed along with the practice of revealing one's own thoughts and feelings to a fellow Christian.
4. The "discernment of spirits" (*discretio*). It is necessary to reflect on one's own experiences as well as one's own practice (*Praxis*). If we are to speak of Christian spirituality, distinctions must always be made. Not every spiritual practice has Christ at its center, not every practice builds up the community, not every practice serves life or corresponds to the double commandment of love, not every practice stands up to critical scrutiny by the community or spiritual advisor, and not every practice is accountable to the Christian tradition (these are essential criteria of *discretio*).

7. Problem Indicators

Christian spirituality is only one of many spiritualities. In its defined form as described above, it often clashes not only with the spirituality of other religions but also with privatized multi-religiousness, individualism and freedom of choice, the claim to self-determination, and the associated rejection of demands on the individual in late modernity. The self-determined individual has to make a choice here – one that is as informed and reflective as possible.

The reference to one's own (necessarily interpreted) experiences, which are often used to justify such a choice, must also be questioned. The individual will have to decide whether or not he or she agrees with William James ^{GND}, who, taking into account numerous concurring reports, considers the existence of "a present reality more diffused and general than that which our special senses yield"^[1] to be possible.

There are a number of other aspects that can be problematized, e.g., the time and context-dependence of forms of spirituality and the resulting relativization of their demands, or the relationship between methodical human effort in a

praxis pietatis and the free, unconditional grace of God. Questions about certain forms of biblical spirituality are also repeatedly raised, for example, the psalms of vengeance or the last verses of Psalm 137. Here, we can only refer the reader to the rich literature on the subject.^[2]

8. Ecumenical Breadth

The ecumenical dimension of Christian spirituality ought to be emphasized: on the one hand, all of its forms – Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and Pentecostal – have common roots; on the other hand, it is in many cases easier for the separate churches to engage in common practice in this area than is currently the case with worship services. In addition, a clearly and unambiguously represented Christian spirituality is also a good basis for interreligious dialogue.

Recommended Literature

McGinn, Bernard et al. (Hrsg.), *Christian Spirituality* (Vol. 1–3), New York 1985–1989.

Waaïjman, Kees, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Studies in Spirituality Supplement 8), Leuven/Paris/Dudley 2002.

Citations

- ¹ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York 1990, 63. James even assumes God's work.
- ² For a treatment of Ps 137, see Dahlgrün, Corinna, *Christliche Spiritualität. Formen und Traditionen der Suche nach Gott. Mit einem Nachwort von Ludwig Mödl*, Berlin/New York ²2018, 174–181. This book, which forms the basis for the article as a whole, contains numerous references to literature on a wide variety of topics.

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