

THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE SERIES

SPIRITUALITY  
AND  
MYSTICISM

*A Global View*

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## What Is Spirituality?

THE QUESTION THAT SERVES as the title for this opening chapter would seldom have been asked a century ago, for the term “spirituality” began to be frequently used only around the middle of the twentieth century. Since then it has become more and more common. One of the major publishing ventures of our time is a series entitled *Classics of Western Spirituality*, the first volume of which appeared in 1978. The response of the public to this series has been so enthusiastic that the editors have decided to leave it open-ended instead of stopping at a certain number of volumes, as originally planned. The last quarter of the twentieth century also saw the inauguration of another important new series, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, which will consist of twenty-five volumes when complete.<sup>1</sup>

The generally positive response given to these two publishing ventures is just one indication of the widespread interest in spirituality today. Whereas the term “spiritual” was once often used in a negative sense to imply that a person was otherworldly or even irresponsible, today it is frequently used as a badge of honor, as when a person claims to be “very spiritual, though not religious.” But people may well mean quite different things by such a phrase. As a first step toward clarifying how “spiritual” and “spirituality” will be understood in this book, it will be helpful to look at the root meaning of these two words.

### THE ROOT MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY

Like so many English words, “spiritual” and “spirituality” have a Latin root. The Latin verb *spirare* means “to breathe,” while the corresponding adjective *spiritualis* means “of or belonging to breathing or to air.” We see at once that this word group has to do with life, for it is only through breathing that

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1. The *Classics of Western Spirituality* are published by Paulist Press, while the series *World Spirituality* is published by Crossroad.

human beings can stay alive. In early Christian writings, there arose an important nuance to that literal meaning. When the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin by various writers in the second and third centuries of our era, a crucial term in St. Paul's letters, *pneumatikos*, was translated as *spiritualis*. What this word meant for St. Paul can best be understood by the context in which he used it near the beginning of his First Letter to the Corinthians, where he writes that he is speaking "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things (*pneumatika*) to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor 2:13). Spiritual persons are, then, those who are open to the Spirit of God. Paul contrasts these with persons who are "natural" (*psychikos*) and "fleshly" (*sarkinos*). It is clear that the point of the contrast is not between what is corporeal and what is noncorporeal. "Flesh" does not refer to the body as such but rather to creatureliness. To live "according to the flesh" means to live according to purely self-centered inclinations, which is inevitable in those who are immature in the faith. What Paul seeks is spiritual maturity, living according to the promptings of God's Spirit, whose fruit he describes in another of his letters as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22). For a follower of Christ to live in such a way is a preeminent mark of what Paul means by "a spiritual person." This brings us back to that root meaning of *spiritualis* as "pertaining to breathing" and hence to life, which is why Paul can very readily refer to God's Spirit as "the Spirit of life," as when he writes to the Romans that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Rom 8:2).

On the basis of this root meaning of "spiritual" in the early Christian tradition, let us now look at the corresponding noun, "spirituality." The first certain appearance of this word in Christian literature dates from the fifth century, in a letter that was once ascribed to St. Jerome but is now considered to have been written by someone else. It is addressed to an adult who had recently been baptized and urges that person to live an authentic Christian life, always moving forward, avoiding all lukewarmness. The author writes that through "the new grace" received in baptism all cause for sorrow or tears has been removed. The newly baptized is urged to "act, be on guard, run, hasten. Act in such a way that you progress in spirituality (*in spiritualitate*)," that is, in life according to the Spirit that was given in baptism. This section of the letter concludes with the words, "While we have time, let us sow in the Spirit, that we may reap a harvest in spiritual things (*in spiritualibus*)."<sup>2</sup> Here, too,

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2. Pseudo-Jerome *Epistle 7*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844-55), 30:105-16, quoted by Aimé Solignac, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (1937; repr., Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 14:1143, s.v. "Spiritualité."

there is no sense that living spiritually has anything to do with disdain for the body or for matter. It is, rather, a matter of living in accord with the promptings of the Spirit of God, as modeled by Jesus Christ's own manner of life as described in the Gospels.

By the early Middle Ages, however, this meaning of "spiritual" and "spirituality" was at times replaced by a more philosophical meaning in which the contrast was not with living according to merely human inclinations but rather with that which was bodily or material. Some reasons for this change will be discussed in the third chapter of this book, but the change itself can be seen, for example, in a work by a ninth-century German monk who contrasted *spiritualitas* with *materialitas* and *corporalitas*. Four centuries later the most influential of the medieval scholastic theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas, used the noun *spiritualitas* about seventy times, usually in the sense of life according to the Holy Spirit but fairly often in opposition to materiality or bodiliness.<sup>3</sup>

With the rise of vernacular languages in Europe, the Latin term gave rise to cognate terms in French (e.g., *spiritualité*) and English (*spirituality*). In both languages the Pauline meaning was often retained, though the noun also was used to refer to clerics exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction, as contrasted with laypersons who exercised civil jurisdiction. The philosophical sense, contrasting the spiritual with the corporeal or material, sometimes appeared as well. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, writers like Swami Vivekananda and Annie Besant who sought to promulgate the values of Hinduism in the West regularly used the word "spirituality" to characterize Indian religion as being superior to rampant "materialism" in Western culture.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with the third decade of the twentieth century, however, there began to appear a number of books in English referring to Christian spirituality in their titles, one of the first being entitled simply *Christian Spirituality*, a translation of a four-volume French work by Pierre Pourrat. By the early twenty-first century the number of such titles has become legion. The words "spiritual" and "spirituality" are also used in the titles of journals (e.g., *Spiritual Life*) and in journal articles, workshops, conferences, and scholarly associations (such as the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality). When used by Christians, the terms are normally related to that original Pauline sense of living according to the promptings of God's Spirit. Nevertheless, many precisions to the meaning of the terms have been offered in recent years, including nuances arising in non-Christian settings. We will

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3. Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12, no. 2 (1983): 131.

4. *Ibid.*, 133.

look briefly at three of the most significant of these, each somewhat different from the other two and yet arguably complementary.

### THREE WAYS OF DESCRIBING OR DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

A number of writers regularly speak of spirituality in terms of self-transcendence. One of the most prominent of these is Sandra Schneiders, who notes in one of her numerous studies on the topic that the term “spirituality” has three interrelated references: first, to a fundamental dimension of the human being; second, to the lived experience that actualizes that dimension; and third, to the academic discipline that studies the experience.<sup>5</sup> Here, as well as in other studies she has published, Schneiders defines spirituality as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>6</sup> This accords with what we said earlier in this chapter about the kind of maturity that St. Paul sought to foster in the Corinthians and members of other churches to which he wrote. It is well known that infants or young children tend to assume that the entire world revolves around them, that they are the center of everyone’s attention, and that their needs are the only ones that should be heeded. What we mean by “growing up” involves in large measure a transcending of this self-centered understanding of oneself and one’s place in the world. When this self-transcendence is geared not merely toward a more comfortable adaptation to life in a family or society but toward what Schneiders calls “the ultimate value one perceives,” then one may properly speak of spiritual experience or spirituality. Since we have used St. Paul’s writings as an avenue of approach to the meaning of spirituality, some persons may feel it inappropriate to use the term outside of a Christian context. While it is important to beware of subtle ways of fostering a kind of Christian imperialism vis-à-vis other traditions, Schneiders’s broad definition of spirituality in terms of transcendence “toward the ultimate value one perceives” makes it quite legitimate to speak, for example, of Hindu spirituality or Jewish spirituality. Indeed, since the ultimate value need not be perceived as a personal God (as it is not only in Christianity but also in Hinduism, Judaism, and other theistic religions), one could just as properly speak of Buddhist or Daoist spirituality, where there are clearly transcendent horizons

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5. Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., “Spirituality in the Academy,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 678.

6. *Ibid.*, 684.

of ultimate value (the Buddha, nirvana, the Dao) even though none of these is understood to be a personal God. Indeed, the above-mentioned series *World Spirituality* even includes a volume entitled *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*. Although some might consider the phrase “secular spirituality” to be a contradiction in terms, there are good reasons to think that some forms of human experience can properly be identified in this way. This brings us to a second way in which spirituality has been understood in recent years.

In the introduction to that volume on secular spirituality, Peter Van Ness writes that “the spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realizing one’s truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is.”<sup>7</sup> This cosmic context, a sense of connectedness with all reality (and especially with every living thing on earth), is readily apparent in some of the works of Ursula Goodenough, a professor of biology who has written not only a best-selling textbook on genetics but also a widely read volume of reflections on the spiritual meaning that can be found at the heart of scientific endeavor. In this latter work, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, she writes that although she finds herself unable to believe in a personal God, she revels in a sense of connectedness with other living beings that can only be described as sacred. Aware of sharing a common ancestor with all forms of life, Goodenough writes that we are connected “all the way down,” and this connectedness is the source of what she calls her faith:

For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no superordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than that the continuation continue until the sun collapses or the final meteor collides. I confess a credo of continuation.<sup>8</sup>

Other writers go somewhat further by emphasizing that this sense of connectedness applies even to inanimate things. One of the best exemplars of this kind of “nature spirituality,” even though he did not use the term, is the nineteenth-century American naturalist John Muir, who wrote in one of his many essays:

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7. Peter H. Van Ness, “Introduction,” in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, *World Spirituality* 22 (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 5.

8. Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 171.

To lovers of the wild, these mountains are not a hundred miles away. Their spiritual power and the goodness of the sky make them near, as a circle of friends . . . You bathe in the spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature.<sup>9</sup>

For someone like Muir, the wilderness itself would sometimes be described as a temple or church, while the animals he encountered there were recognized as his “brothers and sisters.” This attitude is regularly referred to as “biocentrism,” implying that the springs of personal vitality are to be found not in human beings alone (“anthropocentrism”) but in everything that lives. Protecting and furthering the diversity of species on earth are accordingly two of the principal aims of persons whose spirituality follows this pattern of connectedness. Spirituality of this sort is certainly not opposed to spirituality defined in terms of self-transcendence. Indeed, Goodenough writes at one point that by becoming lost in something much larger than her own self she finds “the possibility of transcending my daily self.”<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on connectedness with the realm of nature nevertheless allows us to see this at the very least as a special subset of spirituality understood as self-transcendence.

For a third and last example of how spirituality is sometimes described or defined today we turn to the work of the late Walter Principe, a Basilian priest who once served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Basing his reflections on many earlier studies, Principe suggested that spirituality can best be defined if one keeps in mind three different though related levels. The first of these is the “real” or “existential” level, the way in which someone understood and lived a particular ideal. For Christians, this ideal will normally be described in trinitarian terms, such as “life in the Spirit as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and daughters and sons of the Father.”<sup>11</sup> For other traditions, spirituality at this level will correspondingly be the way a person lives, within his or her particular historical context, that aspect of the tradition that one considers the highest and most conducive to leading to the ideal being sought. A second level is the formulation of a teaching about this lived reality. Often this formulation will be written by a person reflecting on his or her experience at the first level, though at other times it will be composed by someone familiar with that person’s experience (such as a spiritual director or guide). Throughout the present work we will

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9. John Muir, “Twenty Hill Hollow,” in *Wilderness Essays: John Muir*, ed. Frank Buske (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1980), 88.

10. Goodenough, *Sacred Depths*, 102.

11. Principe, “Toward Defining Spirituality,” 136.

see many examples of this kind of formulation, such as the treatises that St. Teresa of Avila composed as she reflected on her own journey toward what she called “spiritual marriage” with God. Finally, Principe’s third level is what is being practiced in this book, namely, the scholarly examination of the first and second levels (especially the second level since the formulations will generally be more readily available to us than the lived reality of the first level, above all in the case of persons who have died). In an attempt to sum up the common elements in all three levels, Principe wrote toward the end of his article: “Spirituality, in this author’s opinion, points to those aspects of a person’s living a faith or commitment that concern his or her striving to attain the highest ideal or goal. For a Christian this would mean his or her striving for an ever more intense union with the Father through Jesus Christ by living in the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Principe’s reference to “union” leads us to a consideration of another term that regularly crops up in the study of spirituality, namely, mysticism. In fact, when the persons responsible for launching the earlier-mentioned series *Classics of Western Spirituality* were pondering what to call the series, they gave serious consideration to calling it *Classics of Western Mysticism*. Their ultimate decision to go with the term “spirituality” was probably correct from a marketing standpoint since this term is much more common in everyday parlance than is “mysticism,” but there is enough overlap in meaning that mysticism should also be discussed in this opening chapter.

#### WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

The way we began our consideration of spirituality—by looking at the etymology of the word—will also provide a useful entrée into our discussion of mysticism. The English word is derived ultimately from the Greek noun *mystērion* (“mystery”) and the adjective *mystikos* (“mystical”), both related to the verb *myein*, which means “to close” (e.g., to close the eyes or lips) and accordingly conveys a sense of what is hidden or secret. There have been scholars who argued that the ancient mystery religions of the Greeks lie behind the New Testament’s use of *mystērion*, but in fact the New Testament usage is best understood against a Semitic background as found in the Hebrew scriptures. The ancient Israelites thought of God as abiding above the solid firmament of the sky and joined there by a group of heavenly advisors sometimes called “the sons of God” (Job 1:6) or “the divine council” (Ps 82:1), similar to a civic governing body on earth. God would regularly con-

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12. Principe, “Toward Defining Spirituality,” 139.

sult with these beings before making final decisions, and for the most part these consultations were hidden from human beings. Some humans, however, were permitted access to the divine assembly. These were the prophets, who could then pass on the divine secrets to persons on earth who were willing to listen to them. A particularly clear instance of this is found early on in the Book of Daniel, where the prophet says: "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days" (Dan 2:28).

In the New Testament Jesus himself regularly functions as a prophet of this sort, as when after narrating the parable of the sower he tells his disciples, "To you has been given the secret (*mystērion*) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables" (Mk 4:11). This and similar texts (e.g., Mt 11:25-27) are the Gospel counterparts to the much more frequent use of the term *mystērion* in the Pauline letters, where St. Paul writes that he and his fellow apostles are to be regarded as "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1) since they "speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor 2:7). A central element in this mystery is that God wills all people to be saved, Gentile as well as Jew (Eph 3:4), while in the letter to the Colossians a note of personal intimacy with Christ is emphasized, for the Apostle's commission is "to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages but has now been revealed," namely, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:26-27). These passages, along with sixteen other references to "mystery" in the Pauline literature, led the distinguished New Testament scholar Joseph A. Fitzmyer to write that *mystērion* is so central to Paul's thought that "it conveys for him the content of his gospel."<sup>13</sup>

When the great third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria reflected and wrote commentaries on various books of the Bible, he regularly tried to grasp what he called the "mystical sense" (*mystikos nous*) of the text, that is, the deeper meaning that God wanted to keep hidden from the prying eyes of the profane and even from immature Christians who were not yet able to grasp it. A similar use of the term "mystical" can be found in Origen's fellow Alexandrian of the preceding generation, Clement. Somewhat later, the term was likewise applied to the sacraments in order to convey the truth that the deeper reality of a sacrament was hidden from those who did not approach it with the eyes of faith. The eucharist, for example, was sometimes said to be not simple bread but "mystical bread," while the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the

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13. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Pauline Theology," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., et al. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1389.

late fourth century calls this sacrament “the mystical sacrifice of [Christ’s] body and blood” (6.23.4).

Even these few references suffice to show that the meaning of “the mystical” in the Christian Scriptures and the early church was far removed from the sense that many people have given the term in more recent centuries, when mysticism has often had connotations of the unusual and exotic (visions, ecstasies, levitation, and similar phenomena). This is not to say, however, that the search for the mystical sense of scripture by someone like Origen was devoid of personal feeling. For example, in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he speaks as though from personal experience of one who “has burned with this faithful love for the Word of God” and “has been pierced with the lovable spear of His knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for Him by day and night, can speak of nought but Him, would hear of nought but Him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor hope, except for Him alone. . . .”<sup>14</sup>

In later centuries, this affective side of mystical writing became more and more pronounced, with the result that a common understanding of mysticism in recent centuries has held it to be a special state of consciousness surpassing ordinary experience through union with the transcendent reality of God. This was already the case in what the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the first recorded use of the word in this language, in Henry Coventry’s *Philemon to Hydaspes* (1736). Coventry wrote: “How much nobler a Field of Exercise . . . are the seraphic Entertainments of Mysticism and Extasy than the mean and ordinary Practice of a merely earthly and common Virtue!” Here mysticism is clearly considered to be something extraordinary, akin to ecstasy and of an altogether different order from what is “mean,” “earthly,” and “common.” Influential theologians and spiritual writers accepted this understanding, with the result that for many there was an essential distinction between mystical and ordinary Christian life, the former being an extraordinary way for those specially called to it (even though the best of these theologians, like Augustin-François Poulain, avoided an overemphasis on extraordinary experiences).<sup>15</sup>

More recently, however, and perhaps above all because of the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the universal call to holiness, there has been a retreat from the distinction between an “ordinary” and a “mystical” way of Christian life. The change can be seen in the following passage from one of

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14. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.8, trans. R. P. Lawson, *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957; repr., New York: Paulist, n.d.), 198.

15. Augustin-François Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (10th ed., 1922; repr., Westminster, Vt.: Celtic Cross Books, 1978).

Thomas Merton's best-known books, where he emphasizes not so much the differences among various stages of the spiritual journey as rather the basic continuity underlying them all:

To reach a true awareness of [God] as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light. Call it faith, call it (at a more advanced stage) contemplative illumination, call it the sense of God or even mystical union: all these are different aspects and levels of the same kind of realization: the awakening to a new awareness of ourselves in Christ, created in Him, redeemed by Him, to be transformed and glorified in and with Him.<sup>16</sup>

A still more recent development should be noted as we conclude this introductory discussion of mysticism. In the passage just quoted, Merton speaks of "mystical union," and union has indeed been a term frequently associated with mysticism. However, one of the most prolific and respected scholars of mysticism in our own time, Bernard McGinn, has suggested that union is not the most essential characteristic of Christian mysticism, especially if such union is understood as a "union of absorption or identity in which the individual personality is lost."<sup>17</sup> His own extensive study of texts commonly regarded as mystical has led him to conclude that the term "presence" is a more useful category for describing the unifying characteristic in the various expressions of Christian mysticism. McGinn accordingly writes that "the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."<sup>18</sup>

## THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

Having seen the basic meaning of spirituality and mysticism, we turn next to a consideration of how these interrelated subjects can best be studied. One helpful approach makes use of what Bernard Lonergan calls "intentional and conscious operations." In his important work *Method in Theology* as well as in

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16. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1973), 175-76.

17. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvi.

18. *Ibid.*, xvii.

some of his articles, Lonergan notes that in any endeavor we regularly and ineluctably move through various operations, corresponding to four different levels of consciousness. On the empirical or experiential level, we “sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move.” On the intellectual level, the level of understanding, we “inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, [and] work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression.” On the rational level, we “reflect, marshal the evidence, [and] pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement,” and on the responsible level we “deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry out our decisions.”<sup>19</sup> His basic point is that in learning anything we move from data that we have gathered or experienced (the first level of consciousness) to the attempt to understand the data, from there to the judgment as to whether or not our understanding is correct, and finally to a decision about what this means for the way we conduct our lives, espouse certain values, and the like.

Even the youngest children move through these operations as they come to learn more and more about the world around them, but in the realm of scholarship one will regularly practice what Lonergan calls “functional specialties” in order to facilitate one’s work in a particular field of study. He discusses eight such specialties in all, but the first four are particularly pertinent to the study of the past, which is the focus of this present study of Christian spirituality. These first four specialties are research, interpretation, history, and dialectic, and they correspond to the operations characteristic of the four levels of consciousness mentioned above. As we consider these four specialties one by one, an orderly way of undertaking the study of spirituality should become apparent.

### *Research*

Research is the specialty by which we come into contact with and accumulate the data that are pertinent to our particular field of study. For the study of Christian spirituality, this will certainly include research into written texts. Some specialists in research seek out manuscripts that may have been gathering dust in libraries, caves, or bazaars for long periods of time. Others correlate the readings in disparate manuscripts of the same treatise, trying to determine the original text when the manuscripts have variant readings of certain words or phrases. Others painstakingly publish critical editions of

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19. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, Seabury paperback, 1972), 9.

these treatises, offering the reader not only what they consider the most authentic text but also the variant readings in a critical apparatus so that other possibilities may be entertained, while still other scholars translate ancient texts into modern languages for the benefit of those who do not have the training to read the originals.

These are some of the ways in which primary research is done in the field of Christian spirituality. In recent decades it has led to highly acclaimed critical editions of the works of such important writers as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart. There is, however, the danger that one might conclude that research in spirituality, whether done by specialists or by students, is limited to texts. In fact, written texts comprise only a part of the material that is relevant. A fine article by P. Joseph Cahill discusses five “categories of symbolic expression” that illustrate the wide variety of materials that can contribute to the study of one or another field of theological or religious studies, including spirituality.<sup>20</sup> These five are (1) a body of literature, especially normative literature (which for Christians would be primarily the Bible); (2) theological formulations, including ones found in treatises of systematic theology but also stories, songs, legends, and expressions of popular wisdom; (3) visual art forms, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture; (4) aural art forms, usually but not exclusively sacred music; and (5) various historical formulations distinct from literature, such as popular forms of devotion, religious garb, and the development of formal institutions. The first of these five, the normative literature of the Bible, will be examined in some detail in the following chapter; here we will discuss the other four.

When one first hears the phrase “theological formulations” and wishes to apply it to the study of Christian spirituality, the temptation may be to think only of treatises of mystical theology like those of St. John of the Cross or that earlier-mentioned scholarly work by Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, but Cahill rightly notes that theological formulations also include stories, songs, and legends. The entire realm of religious poetry opens up a vast field of study for students of spirituality. One need only think, for example, of the crucial role that George Herbert’s poem “Love” had on the spiritual development of Simone Weil as she describes this in her spiritual autobiography.<sup>21</sup> So, too, as regards novels and short stories, and not just those with an explicitly religious theme. As David Tracy writes in one of his early theological works, “by redescribing the authentic possibilities of human existence . . . fictions open our minds, our imaginations, and our hearts to newly authentic

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20. P. Joseph Cahill, S.J., “Theological Education: Its Fragmentation and Unity,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 334-42.

21. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, Colophon Books, 1973), 68. See also Leslie Fiedler’s introduction to this book, 24-25.

and clearly transformative possible modes of being-in-the-world.”<sup>22</sup> Thomas Merton was someone who sensed this and wrote about it movingly in his essays about the fictional works of writers like Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Boris Pasternak.<sup>23</sup>

Visual art forms are also a treasure trove for research in Christian spirituality. Among the many books by the late Henri Nouwen was one entitled *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, his reflections on four of the most revered icons of the Eastern Christian church.<sup>24</sup> Other authors have written more scholarly works that also help reveal the deep spirituality to be found in these images.<sup>25</sup> Titus Burckhardt writes at the very beginning of his foreword to one of these books, “The art of icons is a sacred art in the true sense of the word. It is nourished wholly on the spiritual truth to which it gives pictorial expression.”<sup>26</sup> Similar words could be applied to some of the masterpieces of painting in the Western Christian church, whether Bonaventura Berlinghieri’s scenes from the life of St. Francis of Assisi, Matthias Grünewald’s powerful depictions of the crucifixion, or Georges Roualt’s paintings of the face of Christ. Paintings from more recently founded Christian churches in Africa and Asia can reveal special characteristics of spirituality on those continents, such as reverence for one’s ancestors, while the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe at the much-visited pilgrimage center outside Mexico City has deeply influenced Latino spirituality throughout South and North America.

Of course, visual art includes much more than painting. Works of sculpture, whether free-standing pietàs or carvings on the tympanums and side-walls of medieval churches, reveal much about the spirituality of particular epochs, as does the very architecture of the churches. Margaret Miles’s *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity* is especially fine in pointing out what the interiors of Catholic and Protestant churches at the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation tell us about the respective spiritualities of these two major traditions in Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

Aural art forms are another rich source for research in the history of Christian spirituality. Although Gregorian chant and the Latin texts for which it was composed are no longer widely used in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council came to permit the use of vernacular lan-

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22. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 207.

23. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981).

24. Henri Houwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1987).

25. See, e.g., Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983).

26. *Ibid.*, 7.

27. Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity* (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

guages in the liturgy, there are still centers where it is sung; many persons testify to the way in which these monophonic pieces nourish their prayer life. At the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther promoted the singing of hymns in vernacular languages, composing some of them himself. The Catholic theologian and historian of spirituality Louis Bouyer, himself once a Lutheran pastor, pays rich tribute to this aspect of Protestant spirituality when he writes:

We must not forget the most innovative aspect of all of Luther's Reformation—choral song. This was composed of the content of traditional hymns, sequences and anthems, strongly personalized . . . and vigorously rhymed, and surely remains a liturgical creation whose effects have never been anything but beneficial . . . What these songs were able to achieve in the diffusion of a surely evangelical piety cannot be overestimated.<sup>28</sup>

Of all the Germans who followed Luther, the one who some believe understood him best was not a theologian but the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, whose compositions have been expertly studied for their spiritual and theological depth by Jaroslav Pelikan and others.<sup>29</sup> Much more recently, rich forms of music sung in the vernacular have been composed in African countries. Even before the Second Vatican Council the *Missa Luba*, a folkloric setting of the Latin Mass using rhythms and instruments common in the Congo, quickly became known and appreciated throughout the Christian world, while the chants developed at the ecumenical monastery of Taizé in eastern France now nourish liturgical spirituality on every continent.

What Cahill calls "historical formulations distinct from literature" form a fifth broad area for possible research in spirituality. Popular forms of devotion can tell us much about the way a particular group understands its search for a nourishing spiritual life. For example, the way in which the Toba/Qom people in the Gran Chaco of northern Argentina have brought elements (especially dance) from their ancestral religion into liturgical services led by Mennonite missionaries has resulted in what one of those missionaries calls a "healthy syncretism." According to him, this has allowed members of that indigenous ethnic group to be engaged in "constructing their own theology and expressing that theology through a spirituality and a church that are unique. It is the celebration of this very uniqueness that gives hope."<sup>30</sup> Simi-

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28. Louis Bouyer, *Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality*, vol. 3 of *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 75.

29. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

30. Willis G. Horst, "Spirituality of the Toba/Qom Christians of the Argentine Chaco," *Missiology: An International Review* 29, no. 2 (April 2001): 182.

lar statements could be made about indigenous ethnic groups in other parts of Latin America and in Africa and Asia; specific examples of this kind of “healthy syncretism” will be given in later chapters of this book.

The development of formal institutions is another aspect of this fifth category of symbolic expression. One of the most significant instances of this would be the rise of various religious orders in the Catholic Church. Numerous religious orders and congregations have developed particular ways of living according to the gospel that have influenced not only those who are actually members of these orders but also laypersons who are affiliated with them as “associates” or members of “Third Orders.” One of the most important recent publications in the field of Christian spirituality, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, has numerous and fairly lengthy articles describing some of these spiritualities, including ones proper to Augustinians, Benedictines, Carmelites, Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and Salesians.<sup>31</sup>

### *Interpretation*

Having seen some of the areas in which research can be done by students and scholars of Christian spirituality, we may turn more briefly to the other three functional specialties that are at play when we confront the past in any field of study. The first of these three is called “interpretation,” a challenge that will necessarily arise as soon as any thoughtful person comes into contact with a text, image, musical composition, liturgical service, or institution not previously familiar. Here the challenge can be daunting. One may have to acquire skill in one or more foreign languages, skill that is advanced enough to pick up nuances of meaning that will not be apparent merely with the help of a dictionary. Symbolic elements in the paintings or sculpture of another culture and era may remain puzzling for months on end, only to become clear when one has the chance to speak with someone from that culture and finally be able to exclaim, “Oh yes, now I understand!” Specialists in the art of interpretation regularly publish monographs and commentaries in order to make known their findings, allowing students to increase their own understanding by consulting such works and, perhaps, coming up with alternative interpretations of their own. To give just one example, which will be considered more fully in a later chapter, the first Dominican ever to be charged with heresy was the fourteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart. In defending him-

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31. Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993).

self at his first trial, he insisted that his accusers had misunderstood him by taking his statements out of context and, among other things, understanding in temporal categories what Eckhart intended as eternal.<sup>32</sup> For someone today properly to interpret texts by someone who lived long ago in another culture and perhaps holding quite different presuppositions can be challenging indeed. Specialists in late medieval thought still today debate the correctness of the judgment pronounced against Eckhart.

### *History*

Because of this potential difficulty in coming to a correct understanding of a particular point, Lonergan writes that the subsequent operation will be that of judging, specifically judging whether one's first attempt at understanding was correct. However, in what may appear to be a certain jump in logic, he calls the corresponding functional specialty "history" on the grounds that history "judges and narrates what occurred."<sup>33</sup> In any case, a student of spirituality is called to know not only something about this or that figure or movement over the past twenty centuries of Christian history but also what was "going forward" during all this time. What were the influences of one epoch on another? What developments occurred over these centuries? Who were the major players and how did the later ones themselves regard their most influential predecessors? These are just some of the questions that arise when one attempts to grasp something of the entire flow of Christian spirituality, a flow that has in fact occasionally been imaged as a river with all sorts of side tributaries making their particular contributions to the ever widening and deepening stream. Some specialists will attempt to write histories of Christian spirituality as a whole, while others will produce histories of a particular movement or period; some of these works are listed in the bibliography of the present work. Students, on the other hand, are challenged to become reasonably familiar with the basic historical works, always striving to make sure that they learn a reasonable number of details without losing a sense of the overall development over the past twenty centuries. One ought not "lose the forest for the trees." The purpose of this study of history is not simply to become learned about an often fascinating topic. Josef Weismayer,

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32. Thus, Eckhart said his judges were mentally weak if not openly blasphemous "when they say God created the world in another now than in the now of eternity, although every action of God is his substance, which is eternal" ("Response to the List of Fifty-nine Articles," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn, Classics of Western Spirituality [New York: Paulist, 1981], 76).

33. Lonergan, *Method*, 134.

an Austrian historian of Christian spirituality, expressed the ideal motivation when he wrote that we study such history not only to learn how things once were but also in order to grasp something of the multiplicity of the Holy Spirit's work, for the Spirit of God has always opened up new understandings of the message of salvation and new ways of accepting that message.<sup>34</sup>

### *Dialectic*

When one studies this history, and with reference to the above-mentioned image of a river, it soon becomes obvious that the stream has not always been flowing smoothly. There have been floods, whirlpools, logjams, and many other obstacles arising because not everyone proposes or advocates mutually complementary ideas or practices. Mention was already made of the fact that a famous Dominican was, over his protests of innocence, condemned for heresy back in the fourteenth century. In much more recent times, other Catholics who have been professedly or at least tangentially involved in the teaching of Christian spirituality have fallen into one or another degree of disfavor with the Vatican, including Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Anthony de Mello, and Willigis Jäger. Despite what one might think at first, Christian spirituality is a field containing a number of theological land mines. A student of the subject will therefore inevitably be challenged to engage in the fourth functional specialty, which Lonergan calls "dialectic." Of the terms used for these first four specialties, this one may seem the most difficult to understand, for, as Lonergan acknowledges, the word "has been employed in many ways." However, he adds at once that the sense he intends "is simple enough," for dialectic "has to do with the concrete, the dynamic, and the contradictory."<sup>35</sup> In other words, this functional specialty focuses precisely on the specific, conflicting viewpoints—the positions and counterpositions—that history reveals. Anyone practicing this specialty, whether a specialist or a student, is faced with the need to determine as accurately as possible those cases in which the conflicts and differences are irreconcilable or where, on the other hand, they can be seen as complementary truths within a larger whole. The controversy surrounding the writings of Meister Eckhart has already been mentioned as one case in which conflict arose. Another was the controversy over Quietism in seventeenth-century France, with the major adversaries being two bishops, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet and François Fénelon.

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34. Josef Weismayer, "Spirituelle Theologie oder Theologie der Spiritualität?" in *Spiritualität in Moral*, ed. Günter Virt (Vienna: Wiener Dom-Verlag, 1975), 72.

35. Lonergan, *Method*, 129.

*Four Further Functional Specialties*

It should be obvious that merely ordering the opposing positions in their significant similarities and differences is not enough. This brings us beyond dialectic to a whole new set of functional specialties proposed by Lonergan: foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. These need not concern us at such great length because they are less directly involved with the study of the past, the main focus of this book, but something should be said about each. The link between dialectic and foundations is tight. In Lonergan's own words, "Dialectic brings to light oppositions in appreciative and evaluative interpretation and history, in the history of movements, in determining the meaning of texts, and in the special research performed in the prosecution of the foregoing tasks. Foundations takes sides: it selects as its stand some coherent set out of the array of opposing positions."<sup>36</sup> In other words, having come to realize the existence of various positions and counterpositions, a student of spirituality should, after due reflection, take a stand, either claiming that the opposition is only apparent and can be overcome by approaching the question from a different viewpoint or else rejecting one position and espousing the other. Here one is called to a personal faith decision, which has its own risks but at least allows one to avoid the charge of irrelevantly remaining ensconced in an ivory tower away from the turmoil of the real world.

If one takes that stand, one moves on to the next functional specialty, doctrines, by which Lonergan means not expertise about the doctrines of the past but rather the ability to make explicit one's personal stand in language that will express as clearly as possible what one holds as a Christian believer, however mysterious this may be. The study of history will reveal how people like St. Augustine or St. Teresa of Avila did this in their own time and in their own society and culture. Many of their terms and categories are still viable, but one must always be careful to avoid simply repeating the way earlier Christians expressed themselves, whether in words, images, or musical tones. Ideally we are called to do in our own context what those in earlier ages did in theirs.

Having done this for particular issues, one is next challenged to work out what Lonergan calls "appropriate systems of conceptualization" through the practice of the functional specialty of systematics. However adroitly one may have expressed one's stance on particular issues in the practice of the preceding specialty, doctrines, there may be inconsistencies among the expressions

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36. "Bernard Lonergan Responds," in *Foundations of Theology: Papers from the International Lonergan Congress 1970*, ed. Philip McShane, S.J. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1971), 229.

developed on a variety of topics. The exercise of this seventh specialty is intended to remove any such inconsistencies so that the overall presentation of one's spirituality will be coherent. Otherwise one may rightly be charged with holding mutually contradictory positions.

With this resolved, there remains the need to communicate to others what one holds and believes. As Lonergan once wrote, "If one is to hearken to the word, one must also bear witness to it . . . If one assimilates tradition, one learns that one should pass it on."<sup>37</sup> One might even argue that this last specialty, communications, is the most significant of all for Christians, who have, after all, received the solemn charge from the Lord not to leave their light under a bushel basket but to set it upon a lampstand so that it may give light to all in the house (Mt 5:15). In our day, this requires a certain level of expertise not only in verbal, visual, and aural expression but also in contemporary means of communication, including radio, television, motion pictures, and the Internet. It also requires a more-than-superficial familiarity with other religious traditions and with the most important secular movements, for as Christianity becomes a world church and no longer a Eurocentric one, dialogue with persons of other persuasions is absolutely necessary. Later chapters of this book will offer examples of how some others have done this already (for example, Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili, and Bede Griffiths), but such examples should be taken less as models than as spurs to one's own creative thinking about how to do this even better.

With this introduction to the nature of Christian spirituality and mysticism and to how one might best approach the study of such material, we are ready to turn in the next chapter to that one aspect of Joseph Cahill's categories of symbolic expression that was only briefly mentioned above, namely, the normative literature of the Bible. Whatever else might characterize Christian spirituality at its best, it will always have to be a scriptural spirituality if it is to be judged authentic.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the implications of someone's claiming to be "spiritual but not religious"? Is such a distinction well grounded? What might be some potentially negative effects of traditional religious practice on one's spiritual growth?
2. Have there been any particular experiences in your own life that gave you some insight into what you might understand by the term "spiritual experience"?
3. Of the various ways of describing or defining spirituality treated in this chapter, which makes most sense to you? Would you argue for a still different way of defining the term?

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37. Lonergan, "Functional Specialties in Theology," *Gregorianum* 50 (1969): 492.

4. In the light of what was said in this chapter, how would you yourself define mysticism? What do you take to be the relationship between mysticism and spirituality?
5. To what extent do you find Bernard Lonergan's notion of eight functional specialties helpful as a way of facilitating the study of spirituality?

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY

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