

Christian
SPIRITUALITY



ALISTER E. McGRATH

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Christian
SPIRITUALITY
An Introduction

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is an introduction to Christian spirituality, probably one of the most fascinating subjects anyone can study. It assumes little knowledge of the subject, apart from a basic familiarity with some aspects of Christianity, and aims to explain as much as possible. By the end of this book, you should be able to move on to more advanced studies of the subject, including detailed study of some of the classic primary texts of Christian spirituality. It will enable you to get far more than you otherwise might out of lectures on the subject, and encourage you to take the subject further.

This book is subtitled: "An Introduction." Those two words need to be noted carefully, as they indicate the restrictions under which the work operates. Like all introductions to any subject, this book has its limits. There is not enough space to go into some subjects in the detail and depth that they deserve. Many issues that clearly ought to be discussed have had to be omitted, due to lack of space. At times, complex issues have been simplified somewhat, with the needs of those beginning the study of the subject in mind. These issues merit much deeper analysis than is possible within the limited space of this work. Unless a much larger work were to be written, there is little that can be done to remedy these weaknesses. The work attempts to remedy them by identifying suitable works for further study, to allow you to develop your thinking about any matter that interests you. The work aims simply to introduce you to its subject, and then to allow you to pass on to more advanced, specialized, detailed, and stimulating works. You will be able to make much better use of these, and gain far much more

from them, if you have worked through the material provided in this introduction.

Most introductions to Christian spirituality take the form of historical surveys, which set out the main approaches to the subject that have evolved down the ages. Although there is some historical material in the text, this approach has generally been avoided as too didactic and not sufficiently engaging. This book aims to equip you to engage with the great spiritual riches of the Christian tradition, and it does so by introducing you to some of the great themes and texts of that tradition and encouraging and enabling you to engage with it. The climax of this work is its final chapter, which sets out ways of getting the most out of reading classic texts. The work adopts an approach which is designed to encourage and assist the *active engagement* (rather than just passive reading) of classic texts. Although only a small selection of texts are treated in this manner, the general approach can be transferred to any text you wish to study.

In addition to these texts in the final chapter, the work makes extensive use of primary sources at other points. These are intended to encourage you to read and explore primary sources. These texts are sourced, so that you can consider following them through in greater detail at a later stage. A wide range of resources are used in this work, including Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and evangelical writers. The aim is to offer an overview of Christian spirituality which reflects its rich diversity, yet at the same time identifies some of its common themes. The work does not advocate any one specific form of Christian spirituality, but aims to enable its readers to gain a firm understanding and appreciation of the many traditions represented within its ample scope.

I must acknowledge the help of many others during the long process of planning and writing. This book had its

origins in a series of lectures given in 1990 at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, on “Reformation Spirituality,” which gave me the opportunity to wrestle with the origins and styles of the new forms of spirituality which came into being in the sixteenth century. My thinking on how the subject could best be taught was stimulated by my experience of teaching Christian spirituality at the annual six-week summer school organized by the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Oxford over the period 1992–8. I owe an enormous debt to the hundreds of students attending those weekly seminars who helped me evaluate a range of approaches to the subject, and identify suitable texts for engagement. I am also deeply grateful to many colleagues at Oxford, particularly Carolyn Headley, and elsewhere for invaluable discussions on the nature and scope of Christian spirituality, and particularly the difficulties encountered in teaching the subject.

I also gratefully acknowledge the kindness of librarians at the Bodleian Library, the Taylorian Institute, and several colleges of Oxford University in tracing rare primary and secondary sources. Blackwell Publishers have been all that a good publisher should have been, and more, both in terms of encouraging this author and arranging for generous market-testing of the work. Both the publisher and the author welcome comments on this work, which will be invaluable in revising it for future editions.

Alister McGrath
Oxford, September 1998

1

INTRODUCTION

There has been a remarkable growth in interest in the general area of spirituality in recent years. A resurgent cynicism concerning the value of material possessions has led to much greater attention being paid to the spiritual dimensions of life. A growing body of evidence suggests that personal spirituality has a positive therapeutic effect on individuals, pointing to an increasing recognition of the importance of spirituality to human fulfillment and well-being. Alongside a gradual general decline in appeal of institutionalized forms of religion in western culture, there has been a clear rise in popular interest in spirituality, including the various forms of Christian spirituality. This work aims to serve as an introduction to these specifically Christian forms of spirituality.

In this brief opening chapter, we shall explore something of what is understood by the term “spirituality” in general, before moving on to consider what is meant by the more specific term “Christian spirituality.” This introductory chapter is intended simply to clarify some of the terms used in the discussion of Christian spirituality, before moving on to engage with the subject in more detail in the following chapters. To stress the introductory nature of this chapter, we shall adopt a “work-book” approach. This has the merit of encouraging engagement with the material, and will be used more extensively in the final chapter.

Defining “Spirituality”

The word “spirituality” draws on the Hebrew word *ruach* – a rich term usually translated as “spirit,” yet which includes a range of meanings including “spirit,” yet extending to “breath” and “wind.” To talk about “the spirit” is to discuss what gives life and animation to someone. “Spirituality” is thus about the life of faith – what drives and motivates it, and what people find helpful in sustaining and developing it. It is about that which animates the life of believers, and urges them on to deepen and perfect what has at present only been begun.

Spirituality is the outworking in real life of a person’s religious faith – what a person *does* with what they believe. It is not just about ideas, although the basic ideas of the Christian faith are important to Christian spirituality. It is about the way in which the Christian life is conceived and lived out. It is about the full apprehension of the reality of God. We could summarize much of this by saying that Christian spirituality is reflection on the whole Christian enterprise of achieving and sustaining a relationship with God, which includes both public worship and private devotion, and the results of these in actual Christian life.

A Basic Definition of “Spirituality”

Spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic religious life, involving the bringing together of the ideas distinctive of that religion and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of that religion.

A Basic Definition of “Christian Spirituality”

Christian spirituality concerns 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.

The term “spirituality” has gained wide acceptance in the recent past as the preferred way of referring to aspects of the devotional practices of a religion, and especially the interior individual experiences of believers. It is often contrasted with a purely academic, objective or detached approach to a religion, which is seen as merely identifying and listing the key beliefs and practices of a religion, rather than dealing with the manner in which individual adherents of the religion experience and practise their faith. The term is resistant to precise definition, partly due to the variety of senses in which the term is used, and partly due to controversy within the community of scholars specializing in the field over the manner in which the term ought to be used. The definition provided above is an attempt to help students to get a broad idea of the nature and scope of the subject, and should not be regarded as the only way of defining it.

Defining “Christian Spirituality”

Having examined the word “spirituality,” we may now move on and consider the more precise term “Christian spirituality,” which has already been used in a loose sense. For Christianity, spirituality concerns the living out of the encounter with Jesus Christ. The term “Christian spirituality” refers to 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. Christian spirituality may be thus understood as the way in which Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God, or to “practise the presence of God,” to use a phrase especially associated with Brother Lawrence (c.1614-91).

It is helpful to think of Christianity as having three main elements.

1 *A set of beliefs.* Although there are differences between Christians on a number of doctrinal matters, it is relatively easy to show that a common core of beliefs lies behind the different versions of Christianity. These are set out in the Creeds of Christianity, which are accepted as statements of faith by all the main Christian churches. These beliefs have a significant impact on the way in which Christians live.

2 *A set of values.* Christianity is a strongly ethical faith. This does not, however, mean that Christianity is about a set of rules, in which Christians mechanically conform to a set of instructions. Rather, it is about a set of values which arises from being redeemed, such as loving other people and a willingness to deny oneself. These values are strongly linked with the character of Jesus of Nazareth, who is regarded by Christians as both the basis of the life of faith and the supreme example of a life lived in close fellowship with God. A spirit-filled life would thus be expected to reflect and embody Christian values.

3 *A way of life.* Being a Christian is not just about beliefs and values; it is about real life, in which those ideas and values are expressed and embodied in a definite way of living. The everyday life of believers is affected in certain ways by their faith. At its most obvious, this is reflected in going to a church or other form of Christian community which meets for prayer and worship. There are enormous variations in the ways in which Christianity expresses itself, reflecting differences of climate, geography, culture, tradition, and theology. Part of this way of life is the general area which has come to be known as “spirituality,” and which is the subject of this book.

At this point, you will find it helpful to look at some working definitions of spirituality offered by respected authors in this area. You will find it helpful to read each

definition twice, and reflect on the main points the author is attempting to convey. At this point, you should pause, and write down the points which seem to be important to these writers as they attempt to define or describe "spirituality." You may find that you disagree with some of the points which they make, but the points are helpful in clarifying the general nature of spirituality. Ask yourself what particular point each author is concerned to emphasize, and how this helps gain an understanding of the nature of spirituality.

Some Working Definitions of “Spirituality”

Spirituality is a lived experience, the effort to apply relevant elements in the deposit of Christian faith to the guidance of men and women towards their spiritual growth, the progressive development of their persons which flowers into a proportionately increased insight and joy.

George Ganss, “Introduction” to *Ignatius of Loyola*, p. 61.

Spirituality has to do with our experiencing of God and with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as outcomes of that experience.

Richard O’Brien, *Catholicism*, p. 1058.

Spirituality refers to a *lived* experience and a disciplined life of prayer and action, but it cannot be conceived apart from the specific theological beliefs that are ingredients in the forms of life that manifest authentic Christian faith.

Don E. Saliers, “Spirituality,” p. 460.

[Spirituality] is a useful term to describe how, individually and collectively, we personally appropriate the traditional Christian beliefs about God, humanity and the world, and express them in terms of our basic attitudes, life-style and activity.

Philip Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness* p. 2.

Whatever else may be affirmed about a spirituality which has a biblical precedent and style, spiritual maturity or spiritual fulfillment necessarily involves the *whole* person – body, mind and soul, place, relationships – in connection with the whole of creation throughout the era of time. Biblical spirituality encompasses the whole person in the totality of existence in the world, not some fragment or scrap or incident of a person.

William Stringfellow, *Politics of Spirituality*, p. 22.

[Spirituality] is the self-transcending character of all human persons, and everything that pertains to it, including, most importantly, the ways in which that perhaps infinitely malleable character is realized concretely in everyday life situations.

Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality*, p. 9.

Now look at each of the bulleted points below. Each states a theme of importance to spirituality. How do these brief statements help us understand what spirituality is? And in what ways do they help us clarify the distinction between spirituality and Christian doctrine?

- Knowing God, not just knowing about God.
- Experiencing God to the full.
- Transformation of existence on the basis of the Christian faith.
- Attaining Christian authenticity in life and thought.

You may find it helpful to relate these to the working definitions which we have just been considering.

Now consider the following words of an American Protestant professor of theology, explaining to his readers why he chose to spend three months in a Trappist monastery, high up in the Rockies. He regarded himself as an atheist; someone who knew about what theologians were saying, but had no personal experience of God. Read his words, and then turn to the questions that follow.

I am a theologian - I spend my life reading, teaching, thinking, writing about God. But I must be honest - *I have never experienced God*, not really. I am embarrassed by piety; I am ill at ease with those who thrive on God-talk; I have no awareness of what one might mean by the "presence of God."

Look again at the bulleted points set out earlier. Which of these does this passage best illustrate? And how does it relate to the definitions of spirituality which were set out earlier?

Now note how the passage clearly supposes that it is possible to be a theologian without any experience of God. What does this suggest about the relation between theology and spirituality? And what does it suggest about the place of spirituality in theological education?

We shall be exploring these issues in greater depth later in this work; at this early stage, it is important just to be aware of them. We now turn to clarify the vocabulary used in relation to spirituality, before beginning a detailed engagement with its themes in the following chapter.

Clarifying Terms: Mysticism and Spirituality

We need to consider a term which has been used extensively in the past to designate the general area of spirituality - "mysticism." Although this word continues to be used, especially within Catholic and Orthodox circles, it is gradually being displaced by the term "spirituality." In this section, we shall explore how the term "mysticism" came to be used in this context, and the reasons why it is gradually being superseded in general use.

The use of the word "mystical" to refer to the spiritual (as opposed to purely academic) dimension of theology can be traced back to the treatise *On Mystical Theology*, written in the early sixth century by Dionysius the Areopagite. The modern terms "spirituality" and "mysticism" both trace their origins back to seventeenth-century France, and specifically in the rather elitist circles of salon society associated with Madame de Guyon. The French terms *spiritualité* and *mysticisme* were both used to refer to direct interior knowledge of the divine or supernatural, and were apparently treated as more or less synonymous at the time. Since then, both terms have been brought back into circulation.

Some degree of confusion has arisen over their precise meaning, with some writers suggesting that the two are just different ways of speaking about an authentic personal relationship with God, while others suggest that mysticism is to be seen as a special type of spirituality which places particular emphasis on a direct personal experience of God. The present work avoids the use of the term "mysticism," believing that it has become unhelpful and confusing to those beginning the study of spirituality. The term "spirituality" is thus used in preference to many terms which

are encountered in older writings, including “mystical theology,” “spiritual theology,” and “mysticism.”

The term “mysticism” (and related terms such as “mystical” and “mystic”) means very different things to different people. This can be confusing and unhelpful, especially in discussions of Christian spirituality. The three senses of the word are identified below.

1 Mysticism is an approach to the Christian faith which places particular emphasis upon the relational, spiritual, or experiential aspects of the faith, as opposed to the more cognitive or intellectual aspects, which are traditionally assigned to the field of theology. The Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509–64), who is noted for his theological precision, had no difficulty in using the term *unio mystica* (“mystical union”) to refer to the relationship between Christ and the individual believer, but understands this to refer to being united with Christ and sharing in his life and benefits. Some writers therefore contrast “mystical theology” (which deals with the existential or relational aspects of Christian thought) with “dogmatic theology,” which focuses on the distinctive ideas of the Christian faith. On the basis of this understanding of the term, a “mystic” or “mystical writer” is a Christian who deals primarily with the experiencing of God and with the transformation of the religious consciousness. In the present study, the term “spiritual writer” is used as equivalent to “mystic,” and “spirituality” to refer to “mystical theology” in the specific sense of the terms, noted above.

2 In everyday language, mysticism is an approach to spiritual issues, found in religious and non-religious contexts, which stresses inner experience and correspondingly marginalizes or rejects any use of cognitive approaches to spirituality. In this sense of the word, mysticism denotes potentially irrational and antiintellectual approaches to experience, often regarding apparent

contradiction as a virtue. “Mysticism,” on this understanding of the word, would mean “concerned with esoteric teachings, enhanced psychological awareness, or exotic sensory experience.”

3 Mysticism is used to refer to certain specific schools of Christian spirituality, including the “English mystics” of the fourteenth century (such as Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton) and the “German mystics” of the later Middle Ages (such as Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler). Although this usage has become widespread, it is somewhat misleading. First, the writers in question do not use this term to refer to themselves; second, the term implies that their outlook is defined by “mysticism” as defined in sense (2) above, which is often a misrepresentation of their concerns and emphases. Given the widespread use of the term to refer to these medieval schools of spirituality, it is probably impossible to reverse the trend. However, its drawbacks need to be noted and taken into account.

The difficulty in using the term “mysticism” to refer to what is now more widely known as “spirituality” is that the term has so many unhelpful associations and misleading overtones that its continued use is problematic. For this reason, the terms “spirituality” and “spiritual writer” are now to be preferred, and have passed into general use within Christian discussion of the subject. The present work adopts and endorses this convention.

This brief introduction to the discipline of Christian spirituality has raised the question of the various types of spirituality which can be identified. In the following chapter, we shall explore the diversity of Christian spiritualities in more detail.

FOR FURTHER READING

The following are useful introductions to the field of Christian spirituality. Although drawn from a wide variety of

perspectives, they illuminate many of the themes of this introductory chapter.

Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition*. New York: Paulist, 1996.

Michael Downey (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993.

George Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: Exercises and Selected Works*. New York: Paulist, 1991.

Bradley C. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993.

Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold (eds), *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1986.

Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, new edn. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.

John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 2nd edn. Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1992.

William Reiser, *Looking for a God to Pray To: Christian Spirituality in Transition*. New York: Paulist, 1994.

Don E. Saliers, "Spirituality," in D. Musser and J. Price (eds), *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1992.

Philip Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness: Explorations in Contemporary Spirituality*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1988.

William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.

Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*. St Louis, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*. London: DLT, 1991.

Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence through the Ages*. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1996.

2

TYPES OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

The use of the term “Christian spirituality” might seem to suggest that there is a single, well-defined entity of this name. In fact, Christianity is a complex and diverse religion. Although there is widely agreed to be a “core” of Christian beliefs, summarized in widely-accepted documents such as the Apostles’ Creed, there is a significant degree of divergence within Christianity over the interpretation of some foundational beliefs, and especially the forms of church order and life which are appropriate for Christians. In addition, individual characteristics on the part of Christians lead to divergences in spiritual preferences. Given the wide variety of spiritualities which are encountered in Christian history, it clearly makes sense to attempt to gain some sense of the types which are to be found.

One factor of major importance is the basic beliefs of the individual or community. Theology has a profound impact upon spirituality. The importance of this issue is such that it demands that two chapters of this work have been devoted to exploring its contours (see chapters 3 and 4). However, the following factors are also of major importance in shaping spirituality.

1 *Personal issues.* Individual Christians have different backgrounds, personalities, locations on sociological maps, in addition to having slightly different “takes” on the major themes of the Christian faith. The issue of personality is thus of considerable importance in relation to spirituality.

2 *Denominational considerations.* Different Christian communities have significantly different understandings of the nature of the Christian life, and are often linked with theological emphases or teachings which distinguish them from other such groupings. It is therefore of importance to gain at least a basic understanding of the different types of Christianity present in the modern world.

3 *Attitudes to the World, Culture, and History.* Some forms of spirituality are strongly world-renouncing, arguing that Christian authenticity demands withdrawal from the everyday world; others argue that authentic Christianity can only be found by engaging with the world. It is important to appreciate that these distinctions cut across denominational boundaries. For example, some forms of Protestantism are strongly world-affirming, where others seek to renounce the world, especially its attitudes to power and economics. Being a Protestant (or belonging to any other denomination, for that matter) does not automatically entail a positive or negative attitude to the world.

The present chapter will explore these three general factors, after which we shall move on to a more sustained engagement with the complex and important issue of theological foundations for spirituality.

Spirituality, Theology, and Personality

Christian spirituality can be thought of as the attempt to bring into contact and correlate a set of theological beliefs on the one hand with a very specific set of personal and institutional factors on the other. In making this assertion, I am not arguing for the priority of either theology or experience; some begin from theology, and attempt to correlate this with their personal experience; others find

that their experience raises questions and issues which require to be informed by theological reflection. The point is that it is this *process of correlation* which is of central importance within spirituality. Spirituality is not something that is deduced totally from theological presuppositions, nor is it something which is inferred totally from our experience. It arises from a creative and dynamic synthesis of faith and life, forged in the crucible of the desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively, and fully.

We could perhaps explore this process in terms of the concept of “the fusion of horizons,” which is so characteristic a theme in the writings of the noted German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-) in relation to the issue of textual interpretation and application. Gadamer argues that there is a need to allow the “horizon” of the text and the “horizon” of the individual’s situation to be correlated. In the same manner, there is a need for the “horizon” of the individual’s world of experience to be brought into relation with the themes of Christian theology.

It will therefore be clear that a substantial range of “spiritualities” is to be expected, reflecting a set of differing (though clearly related) theological assumptions on the one hand, and the remarkable variety of personal and institutional circumstances which have existed throughout Christian history on the other. We may illustrate this point by considering some of the variables on each side of the process of correlation.

Theological variables

The term “Christian theology” refers to a set of ideas which are recognizably grounded in the Christian tradition, having its origins in the Bible and maintained and developed in the process of reflection, interpretation and transmission within the community of faith. Although there are certain themes

which are found within all recognizably Christian theologies (such as the idea that Jesus Christ is the final self-revelation of God), there are important variations between different types of Christian theology. Some examples of such differences will illustrate the potential for diversity within spirituality.

1 A significantly different attitude to Mary, the “mother of God,” is to be found within different Christian traditions. Broadly speaking, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions place considerable emphasis upon the role of Mary, whereas Protestants do not. One clear consequence of this divergence is the virtual absence of any form of Marian devotion within Protestantism.

2 A wide range of viewpoints can be identified within Christianity concerning the nature and significance of the sacraments. Some Christians regard the sacraments as signs of God’s grace, helpful reminders of something that they already know about. Others see them as signs of the real presence of God within the world, and a powerful affirmation of the divine presence within the created order. Once more, this has potential implications for spirituality – not simply in terms of the role which the sacraments play in personal devotion, but also in terms of how God is understood to be present and active in the world.

3 One of the most noticeable features of Christian history is that groups and individuals who may share a common theological foundation chose to place their emphasis on different aspects of that theology. Thus some Christians place considerable emphasis on the saving work of Christ, where others prefer to think of the doctrine of the incarnation (which we shall explore more fully later: see p. 54) as having supreme importance. The same set of theological beliefs might be affirmed, yet with differing

understandings concerning which of those beliefs is of supreme importance.

We shall be exploring some further aspects of the interaction of theology and spirituality later in this work.

Historical variables

Although this work has avoided the purely historical approach to spirituality which characterizes so many introductions to the subject, this does not mean that history is of no importance to the study of spirituality. History determines one's personal location, and the options which are available. A simple consideration will make this point clear. Most western Christians are well used to the idea of reading their Bibles, either through membership of a study group, for personal devotion, or following a passage as it is read out in church. Yet this is a possibility which depends upon two specific historical circumstances:

- 1 The widespread availability of Bibles;
- 2 The ability to read.

If we were to travel back in time to western Europe a millennium earlier, neither of these circumstances would have applied. Bibles were simply not widely available (in that the technology of printing was still centuries away). And literacy was at a very low level. It is thus perhaps little cause for surprise that biblically-focused forms of spirituality were largely found within monasteries, where copyists provided the texts of biblical books (often beautifully illustrated), and levels of literacy were vastly superior to those found in society as a whole.

An understanding of the historical situation of a spiritual writer is essential to grasping her importance. History defines one's horizons, by limiting the resources available. The present book does not focus on the history of spirituality; nevertheless, you are strongly encouraged to

read about this if you intend to take the study of spirituality further. It is essential to appreciate that the historical situation of both the writer and reader plays a major role in relation to the personal spiritual value which the reader finds in the a text. We shall explore this matter again in the final chapter of this work, as we consider how to engage with classic texts from the past.

Personal variables

As we noted above, the personal situation of the individual or group is also of considerable importance in relation to spirituality. Factors which affect the type of spirituality which an individual finds most helpful include issues which could be described as aesthetic, psychological, and sociological. Examples of these factors include the following.

1 There is widespread disagreement over what constitutes “beauty” in art, architecture, music, and the spoken or written word. Many Christians believe passionately that the most appropriate response to the beauty of God is to worship and praise God using the most beautiful language, music, and architecture possible. Yet there is no agreement as to exactly what these forms should be. Thus some find that spirituality is assisted by Baroque architecture and church music; others prefer the simplicity of open-air worship with simple folk tunes. Issues of personal taste play a major role in spirituality, and cannot be predetermined by theological considerations.

2 Some individuals are very “verbal” in their thinking, and prefer to think of God conceptually. Others (possibly the majority) find that they need images or mental pictures to help them in both their thinking and devotion. For the former, spirituality might be best assisted by good sermons and helpful books. For the latter, however,

good images are of central importance to spirituality. For example, the use of illuminated images in “Books of Hours” or works of religious art in churches does not simply reflect an interest in beautification. It represents a response to the recognition that many people require images or “visual aids” for the purposes of devotion and reflection. Once more, an issue which is more psychological than theological can be seen to have a major potential impact on the area of spirituality.

3 The situations in which individuals find themselves vary enormously. For example, the situations faced by a monk in medieval France, an upper-class widow in eighteenth-century England, and a wealthy financier in 1980s New York are radically different. Each situation is limited in different manners, and offers different opportunities for practising the Christian faith.

Alongside these aesthetic and other such considerations must be set the great issues of gender, class, and race. It must be pointed out that these factors interconnect, making it extremely problematic to isolate them as determinative individually. In what follows, we shall simply note some of the points which need to be borne in mind.

1 Issues of gender are of considerable importance to spirituality, even though there continues to be debate over the nature and extent of the differences between the genders. At one level, this is reflected in the language used to conceive and refer to God: for example, Julian of Norwich (c.1342 – after 1416) makes extensive use of language of motherhood when speaking of Christ. At another, it is reflected in differing conceptions of sin, which are held to reflect gender differences – for example, the suggestion that the predominantly male sin is that of pride, whereas its female equivalent is that of low self-esteem. One of the results of the feminist movement in recent years has

been the recovery of women spiritual writers, especially of the Middle Ages.

2 Issues of race must also be noted, particularly within multicultural contexts (such as North America) in which race and cultural identity are often closely linked. Traditions of spirituality have emerged within Black holiness churches which are quite distinct from those found elsewhere in Protestant Christianity. Similarly, Asian Christians (particularly those having their origins in China or Korea) often incorporate elements deriving from their native culture into their approaches to spirituality.

3 Issues of class must also be noted, not least in that class is often linked with matters of taste and the issue of literacy. Forms of spirituality which are strongly populist often adopt the cultural standards of the groups to which they are directed. These are reflected in the music and literature which are used to sustain contemplation, as well as the forms of art used to encourage meditation and reflection. Thus nineteenth-century American revivalism made extensive use of techniques normally associated with popular theater in its worship.

Even on the basis of this very brief analysis, it will be clear that differences in personal temperament and social milieu will inevitably have implications for spirituality. Even if each person were to share identical theological beliefs and emphases, differences in personal temperament and social context would lead to a multiplicity of spiritualities. It could reasonably be argued that there are as many spiritualities as there are Christians, in that each Christian attempts to respond to the Christian faith in terms of her specific (and unique) circumstances.

It will thus be clear that excellent reasons can be given for speaking of both "Christian spirituality" on the one hand, and "Christian spiritualities" on the other. An analogous