

Christian
SPIRITUALITY



ALISTER E. MCGRATH

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An Introduction

ALISTER E. McGRATH

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
How to Use this Book	x
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Defining “Spirituality”	1
Defining “Christian Spirituality”	2
Clarifying Terms: Mysticism and Spirituality	5
2 TYPES OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY	8
Spirituality, Theology, and Personality	9
Theological variables	10
Historical variables	10
Personal variables	11
Denominational Considerations	13
Catholicism	14
Orthodoxy	16
Protestantism	17
Attitudes to the World, Culture, and History	19
1 Christ against culture	20
2 The Christ of culture	20
3 Christ above culture	22
4 Christ and culture in paradox	23
5 Christ the transformer of culture	23

CONTENTS

3	THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SPIRITUALITY: BASIC ISSUES	25
	The Nature of Theology	26
	The Relations of Theology and Spirituality	27
	Positive aspects of the relationship	28
	Negative aspects of the relationship	31
4	THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SPIRITUALITY: CASE STUDIES	35
	Creation	36
	Explanation	36
	Application	39
	Illustration	40
	Human Nature and Destiny	41
	Explanation	41
	Application	45
	Illustration	46
	The Trinity	47
	Explanation	47
	Application	51
	Illustration	52
	Incarnation	54
	Explanation	54
	Application	59
	Illustration	60
	Redemption	61
	Explanation	61
	Application	67
	Illustration	67
	Resurrection	69
	Explanation	69
	Application	71
	Illustration	73
	Consummation	74
	Explanation	74
	Application	78
	Illustration	79
	Conclusion	80
5	BIBLICAL IMAGES AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY	82
	The Bible as a Resource for Spirituality	82
	Biblical Images and Spirituality	88
	The feast	88
	The journey	91
	Exile	93
	The struggle	94

Purification	96
The internalization of faith	99
The desert	101
Ascent	103
Darkness and light	104
Silence	107
Conclusion	109
6 FACES, PLACES, AND SPACES: VISUALIZATION AND SPATIALIZATION IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY	110
The Visualization of the Divine	111
A problem? The challenge of idolatry	111
Visualizing God: the incarnation	113
Visualizing God: the creation	114
Visualizing God: the sacraments	115
Christian symbolism: the cross	116
A corrective: the apophatic tradition	118
Telling the Story: Faith in Life	119
The Rhythm of Faith: Structuring Time	124
The Christian week	124
The Christian year	125
The monastic day	128
Spiritual Geography: Structuring Space	130
Holy spaces: spirituality and architecture	130
Holy places: the place of pilgrimage	131
7 CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY: ENGAGING THE TRADITION	135
Spirituality and History	135
Interrogating the Text	138
Classic Texts: An Engagement	140
Gregory of Nyssa	141
Augustine of Hippo	143
Anselm of Canterbury	146
Francis of Assisi	149
Hugh of Balma	151
Ludolf of Saxony	153
Julian of Norwich	155
Martin Luther	158
Ignatius Loyola	160
Teresa of Ávila	162
Charles Wesley	165
John Henry Newman	167
James I. Packer	170
Conclusion: Where Next?	173

CONTENTS

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY: INTERNET RESOURCES	175
GLOSSARY OF TERMS	178
SOURCES OF CITATIONS	191
FOR FURTHER READING	198
INDEX	202

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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.

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Alister McGrath
Oxford, September 1998

I

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

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 mal-leable character is realized concretely in everyday life situations.

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

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.

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, espe-

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