

Spirituality: A New Academic Discipline

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Two new MAs in Christian Spirituality have recently been launched at the University of Malta. The second European conference on spirituality as an academic discipline will be held at St. Mary's University College, London from June 30th to July 3rd, 2009. These two events are part of a new phenomenon, the emergence and development of Christian spirituality as a distinct academic discipline. This article will articulate some of that development.

The Meaning of Spirituality

The term spirituality has at least 3 basic references:²

1) It refers to a *constitutive dimension* of the human person: the foundational sensibility and self-transcending capacity of the person for beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love, which have been identified over the years in compacted human experience. Christian spirituality understands this common human inner power and sensibility as being from and for the God of the Christian tradition: this God is the source, support, transformer, and fulfilment of such desire and empowerment in the interiority of a person. This empowering desire is always already connected with the world, so that a person is never shut up inside him/

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2. See Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*, ed. Bradley C. Hanson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 77-81 at 77.

herself and in need of finding a way out into the world; one is always already open to and engaged by the world in the core of one's being.

2) It refers to the lived experience that actualises that dimension in terms of foundational or ultimate meanings and values, and corresponding practices. Christians understand these meanings, values and practices and the desire for their actualization in lived experience in terms of the Christian tradition. Collectively lived traditions that have developed around the religious experiences and teachings of persons like the founders of religious congregations/orders are included in this meaning of spirituality: for example, St. Ignatius of Loyola and Ignatian spirituality.

3) It refers to the *academic discipline* that studies 1 and 2 across societies and cultures over time in third level educational settings. As an academic discipline it will have specialists and scholars who will train others in the field of the discipline, peer reviewed journals, a body of published literature, including dictionaries, and a society of professionals, specialists and scholars who will hold regular meetings and conferences, etc.

I will call these meanings for spirituality S1, S2 and S3. My focus in this article is on S3.

A New Academic Discipline

Reflection on and study of society in the wake of the dramatic and traumatic event of the French Revolution of 1789 led to the emergence of a new academic discipline: sociology. Like any new discipline, sociology did not develop all at once or gain immediate acceptance in university circles. Something similar is happening today with spirituality. The emergence of a new academic discipline is accompanied by a number of signs. I will identify six of them and relate them to spirituality.

First Sign

A first sign is the number of voices in the academy claiming that such a phenomenon is occurring. Examples of such voices in the case of S3 are these:

“The academic study of spirituality at institutions of advanced learning is a major new development in the field of theology and

religion, although writings about and the practice of spirituality are part of the oldest traditions in the history of Christianity.”³

“It is not often that the academy witnesses the birth of a new discipline. But the essays in *Minding the Spirit* provide a historical and substantive overview of just such an event: the study of spirituality as an academic discipline.”⁴

“Christian spirituality has in recent years emerged as a distinct academic discipline in universities, colleges, and theological schools throughout the English-speaking world.”⁵

“In recent years Christian spirituality has emerged as a rich and dynamic player among the academic disciplines, claiming as its focus the critical exploration of religious experience in its many facets.”⁶

“The field of Christian spirituality has changed radically in the twenty years since the late Gordon Wakefield edited the first *SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. The most significant development in the intervening years has been the growth of spirituality as a major academic discipline with its own methodology.”⁷

Second Sign

A second sign is the number of scholars and practitioners working in third level colleges who begin to self-identify what they do in terms of the new discipline.

3. Pieter G. R. de Villiers, “The Spirit That Moves: A New Society and Its First Publication,” in *The Spirit That Moves: Orientation and Issues in Spirituality*, ed. P. G. R. de Villiers, C. E. T. Kourie, and C. Lombard (Bloemfontein: Publications Office of the Free State, 2006), i.
4. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), xi.
5. Arthur Holder, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 1.
6. Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, eds., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, I.F.M.* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2006), 1.
7. Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), vii.

Some leading voices about whom this can be said with respect to spirituality are: Sandra Schneiders, Bernard McGinn, Philip Sheldrake, Kees Waaijman, Mary Frohlich, David Perrin, Joann Wolski Conn, Stephanie Paulsell, Elizabeth Liebert, Arthur Holder, Janet Ruffing, Elizabeth Dreyer, Douglas Burton-Christie, Margaret Benefiel, Celie Kourie, Philip Endean, David Lonsdale, Bernadette Flanagan, Jack Finnegan, and Una Agnew.

Third Sign

A third sign are academic publications: series, books, dictionaries, and journals. Two such series in spirituality began to appear in the latter part of the last century: *Classics of Western Spirituality* (B. McGinn, ed, 1978f; over 100 volumes to date) and *World Spirituality Series* (E. Cousins, ed, 1985f; 20 volumes to date). 3 other series began to appear at the end of that century: *Modern Spirituality Masters (sic) Series* (R. Ellsberg, ed, 1998f), *Traditions of Christian Spirituality* (P. Sheldrake, ed., 1998f), and *The Practices of Faith Series* (D. Bass, ed, 1998f). The following significant books have been published in this century: *With Wisdom Seeking God: The Academic Study of Spirituality* (U. Agnew, B. Flanagan and G. Heylin, eds, 2008); *Studying Christian Spirituality* (D. Perrin, 2007); *Exploring Christian Spirituality* (B. Lescher and E. Liebert, eds, 2006), *The Spirit That Moves: Orientation and Issues in Spirituality* (P. G. R. de Villiers, C. E. T. Kourie, and C. Lombaard, eds, 2006); *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality – Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline* (E. Dreyer and M. Burrows, eds, 2005); *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (A. Holder, ed, 2005); *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (K. Waaijman, 2004); *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (K. Collins, ed, 2000). See, also, Jack Finnegan's *Audacity of Spirit* (2008). A new dictionary has also been published: *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (P. Sheldrake, ed, 2005). And two new peer-reviewed journals, *Studies in Spirituality*, and *Spiritus* have been published, the first from Europe, the other from the United States. *Studies in Spirituality* appeared for the first time in 1990. *Spiritus* began publication in 2001, replacing the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, which had begun publication in 1993.

Fourth Sign

A fourth sign is the creation of a distinctive society of scholars and practitioners of the new discipline. The International Society for the Study of

Christian Spirituality (ISSCS) had its origins at a meeting in Chicago in 1984 organised by Bradley Hanson, and was founded at the American Academy of Religion in Kansas City in 1991. The first meeting of the new Society took place in San Francisco in 1992, and in 1994 the Christian Spirituality Group of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) was established. Among the activities of the ISSCS are the yearly meetings for all its members at the annual meetings of the AAR, where it also holds a number of open sessions and peer reviewed papers are delivered on themes and issues to do with the academic study of spirituality. In Europe the Titus Brandsma Institute has developed SPIRIN, Spirituality International, a world-wide network for those involved in spirituality, and SPINE, a world-wide programme for teaching spirituality via the Internet. SPIRASA, the Spirituality Association of South Africa, which has links with the Titus Brandsma Institute in the Netherlands, was established in 2003.

Fifth Sign

A fifth sign is the establishment of departments, programmes of study, and third level awards in the new discipline. In 1976 Sandra Schneiders launched a doctoral programme in Christian spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California. It was not until 1992, however, that Christian Spirituality became a separate area of study within the GTU, with its own distinct faculty and protocol. Fordham University, New York, the Titus Brandsma Institute at Radboud University, Nijmegen (Netherlands), the Gregorian University, Rome, the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), the Centre for Spirituality, University of Antwerp, Comillas (Spain), the University of Münster (Germany), Centre Sèvres (Paris), Heythrop College, London, Sarum College, Salisbury, St. Mary's University College, London, the University of Lancaster and the University of South Africa (UNISA) now all run academic studies in spirituality, and this is not an exhaustive list. In October of this year two new MAs in Christian Spirituality were launched at the University of Malta. The University of Ljubljana in Slovenia has also expressed interest in establishing an MA programme in Christian Spirituality.

A Department of Spirituality was created at Milltown Institute, Dublin, in 2001, thanks in the main to the leadership of Bernadette Flanagan, who helped launch the new spirituality programmes in Malta. Now about 400 of Milltown's 650 + students are engaged in spirituality studies. 135 of them are studying for

HDips, MAs, STLs, and PhDs, while the others are studying for certificates or diplomas, or doing selected modules. Each year, also, the spirituality summer school attracts more students than the other summer schools.⁸ This trend of large numbers for spirituality studies, present now for a number of years at Milltown, where I work, reflects something new in the field of third level studies at that Institute. To the more classical postgraduate programmes in spirituality, which have been in existence at Milltown since 1984, have been added postgraduate programmes in applied Christian spirituality, postgraduates programmes in supervisory practice through the discipline of spirituality, research postgraduate degrees up to PhD, undergraduate programmes, evening programmes, outreach programmes, and online programmes. The largest programme of studies in Milltown in terms of numbers of students is the National University of Ireland (NUI) HDip/MA programme in Applied Christian Spirituality (ACS), of which I am the current director. The Director of the Higher Diploma and MA in Supervisory Practice at Milltown Institute, Geraldine Holton, is also a member of the Governing Board of the European Society for Supervisory Practice. This Society has chosen to hold its next conference in Ireland for the first time. It will take place in July 2009.

Sixth Sign

A sixth sign is the holding of major conferences. The first conference on Spirituality as an Academic Discipline in South Africa took place in January, 2004; the first European Conference on this theme was held at Milltown Institute in June of the same year. The proceedings of the South African Conference are published in *The Spirit That Moves: Orientation and Issues in Spirituality*. Celie Kourie, one of the editors, was at the Milltown Conference. She described it in the book as follows: "(It) brought scholars together, not only from Europe, but also from Africa, China, and Australia." She omitted to mention that it also brought scholars from the United States, particularly from the International Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Bernadette Flanagan was the chairperson of the planning committee for the Milltown Conference, the proceedings of which

8. In the summer of 2008, for the first time, Canon Law drew more students for its week long summer school than spirituality. However, for the first time, also, there were 2 separate summer school weeks in spirituality. When the figures for both weeks in spirituality are added together, they surpass the very high numbers for the single week of Canon Law.

have been published in *With Wisdom Seeking God*, which was referred to above. A follow on to this conference, as I said at the beginning of the article, will take place in St. Mary's University College, London between June 30 and July 3, 2009.

Conclusion

A new academic discipline has been born, and will continue to grow. The conference at St. Mary's in 2009, which Heythrop College and Sarum College are also involved in organising, will give further impetus to its development. Entitled 'Sources of Transformation: Revitalising Traditions of Christian Spirituality for Today,' the conference will be addressed by, among others, Professor Bernard McGinn, Professor Mary Grey, and Dr Bernadette Flanagan. It is hoped that it will draw many of those working in the field of the study of Christian spirituality within Europe.