

THE TEACHING OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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First, I want to thank the organizers of this Congress for all their hard work. I'm both honored and daunted by the invitation to speak to you this afternoon: honored to be here among such distinguished experts of the Order, daunted by the prospect of trying to summarize, in 20 minutes, such a complex topic as I have been assigned.

I have been asked to speak to you about "the teaching of spiritual theology in the U.S.A." I have brought with me a few materials on current programs available in my part of the world, which you are welcome to examine. Rather than burden you with a mere list of statistics, however, I would like to speak about some general trends. What I have to say will also apply (for the most part) to Canada, because there is such a close relationship between these two countries that students and faculty travel freely between them, and the spirituality programs and theological concerns are often very similar. (Perhaps what I will say also applies Mexico, but other participants here are more qualified to speak of the situation there.)

Some Background

Let me begin by recalling a bit of our history, vastly oversimplified. For a short period in the mid - 1960s and early - 1970s, in North America as elsewhere, popular interest in older expressions of Christian spirituality seemed to wane as people turned their attention to immediate issues of contemporary social and ecclesiastical reform. For U.S. Catholics, much of our inherited spiritual tradition seemed to be too individualistic, negative, other-worldly, and outdated to meet the needs of the *aggiornamento* that Vatican II had called for. Thus Gregorian chant gave way to guitar masses, for example, and *The Imitation*

of Christ was replaced on the bookshelves by translations of authors like Louis Evely and Michel Quoist. "Spiritual theology," at least as it had been previously taught, temporarily went out of fashion as a field of study.

By the mid - 1970s, however, this attitude had begun to change dramatically, perhaps in part because social upheavals and the failure of so many well-intentioned reform projects left people searching for deeper spiritual roots. Whatever the reasons, and they are many, for several decades North America has witnessed an explosion of interest in spirituality of all kinds, not just among Catholics but among the population at large, which has become increasingly "multicultural." People in my part of the world, whatever their ethnic origin and religious affiliation (or lack thereof), are attending meditation seminars and spirituality workshops in record numbers. Many are joining "New Age" groups and movements that promise some form of spiritual enlightenment. Books and tapes on prayer, healing, angels, Celtic spirituality, "near-death" experiences, and a host of similar topics continue top the secular "best-seller" lists. (One sign of the widespread thirst for deeper spirituality among American Catholics is the astounding growth of the Secular Carmelites in my country.)

As part of this larger movement, and as a response to it, there is a massive "research and publication" effort underway to retrieve traditions of spiritual wisdom that would have attracted little attention a generation or two ago. Certain figures, such as Thomas Merton, have been enormously influential in this trend; his many works are all still in print, and new materials from his journals continue to appear. Among religious publishing houses, Paulist Press has already released close to 100 volumes in its excellent "Classics of Western Spirituality" series. Crossroad Publishing Company has completed its 25-volume "World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest." These projects draw upon the foremost experts in the field.¹ Among contemporary scholars, Professor Bernard McGinn of

¹ I It should be noted that both the Paulist Press and the Crossroad series do not limit themselves to the Catholic or even the Christian tradition, but include the contributions of Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and even Native American religions. This is one indicator of the increasingly ecumenical and interfaith climate in the contemporary study of spirituality.

the University of Chicago, who serves on the editorial board for both series, is himself in the midst of writing a massive and already influential new "history of Western Christian mysticism."² Closer to home, both our own O.C.D. periodical, *Spiritual Life*, and ICS Publications have played an important role in promoting Carmelite spirituality among English-speaking North Americans. Similarly, Cistercian Publications is fostering a better knowledge of the Benedictine/Cistercian spiritual tradition with its many translations. All of these have become important resources for teaching and research in spirituality where I come from.

Courses and Programs in Spirituality

Meanwhile, new courses and programs in spirituality are appearing everywhere, not only in Catholic institutions but in Protestant seminaries, medical schools, and so on.³ Forty years ago in the United States, "spiritual theology" was a subject ordinarily taught only in the enclosed world of a Catholic seminary, from scholastic manuals, by male clerics instructing male clerics; the young seminarian-students, moreover, usually came from stable two-parent Catholic families living in a stable Catholic environment, with 12 or more years of Catholic educa-

² To date, three volumes have appeared in this important project: Volume 1: *The Foundations of Mysticism, Origen to the Fifth Century*. Volume 2: *The Growth of Mysticism Gregory the Great through the 12th Century*; and Volume 3: *The Flowering of Mysticism, Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* all published by Crossroad Publishing Company in New York.

³ Although I have not been able to find up-to-date figures, nearly a decade ago Bernard McGinn wrote of "at least four American universities (Fordham, Catholic University, Duquesne and the Berkeley GTU)" where "it is now possible to take a Ph.D. degree in spirituality"; see Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* I (1993): 4. This does not take into account any doctoral programs developed since 1993, nor the many Masters and certificate programs in spirituality currently available in the United States and Canada. Today one can obtain a Doctor of Ministry degree "with a specialization in spirituality" from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, for example, or a "Certificate in Spirituality, Health and Medicine" from Bastyr University in Washington State. I myself teach in a program at the Washington Theological Union leading to a certificate in Carmelite Studies.

tion behind them. Such seminary courses have certainly not disappeared, even if the syllabi and textbooks (as well as the seminarians themselves) have changed. Nevertheless, in the United States and Canada, more and more classes and programs in spirituality are now taught by lay professors (of both sexes and varied religious backgrounds), to lay students (of both sexes and varied religious backgrounds), in colleges and universities that may have no denominational affiliation at all, using a wide range of texts and approaches.⁴

The very success of such programs, and the general popularity of "spirituality" in our part of the world, has raised important questions for the scholars involved, who are trying to clarify the subject matter and methodology appropriate to their developing academic specialization. About ten years ago the American Academy of Religion (the largest academic society of religious scholars in North America) granted formal recognition as a "Related Scholarly Organization" to a new group calling itself the *Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* (SSCS).⁵ The SSCS now has over 400 members, the majority of them currently teaching or doing research in spirituality at colleges and universities in the U.S.A. and Canada. Members typically see themselves as part of an emerging academic discipline struggling to find its place in the academy, much like psychology and sociology earlier in this century. Most do not have degrees in "spirituality" or "spiritual theology" as such; rather, their scholarly pursuits have drawn them to something loosely identified as "the study of spirituality" from such related fields as pastoral psychology, church history, biblical and patristic studies, and so on. The SSCS's quarterly journal, *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, is filled with articles on such meta-questions as whether (and in what sense) "spirituality" can be taught at all, what the precise pedagogical goal in spirituality courses should be (e.g., accumu-

⁴ For a description of a similar shift from a professor who has taught in Church of England seminaries, see Susan J. White, "Can Spirituality Be Taught?" *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 7 (Fall/Winter 1999): 13-17. For a general discussion of the current place of spirituality courses in seminary curricula, see Arthur Holder and Lisa Dahill, "Teaching Christian Spirituality in Seminaries Today," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 7 (Fall/Winter 1999): 9-12.

⁵ See "From the Editors" in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* I (Spring 1993): 2.

lating information? acquiring research skills? personal growth?), and to what extent spirituality studies should be “self-implicating” (in other words, to what extent is it necessary for researchers to follow a spiritual practice themselves in order to *understand* and *teach about* it?). Opinions vary, and members generally recognize, for example, that a class in “spiritual theology” taught at a Catholic seminary may involve very different approaches, themes, and objectives than a survey course in Western spiritual traditions taught to students of many faiths (and no faith) at a secular university.

Current Discussions about the Nature of Spirituality Itself

Although we cannot review all of these issues here, it may be helpful briefly to describe the current scholarly debate in our part of the world concerning perhaps the most fundamental question of all: namely, what counts as “spirituality,” at least for the purposes of teaching and research? Obviously, what scholars take “spirituality” to include will play a crucial role in determining the scope of their research and the methodology used in teaching it as a subject. Dozens of definitions have been proposed, though none so far have won general acceptance. Still, North American scholars have begun to group the various definitions into roughly three different (and often overlapping) categories, corresponding to three different methodological approaches: theological, historical/contextual, and anthropological/hermeneutical.⁶

Theological Approach

The *theological* approach is the most venerable and perhaps most familiar to Catholics, with roots that go back to the old manuals of “ascetical and mystical theology.” This approach is represented today by such works as Charles-André Bernard’s

⁶ Bernard McGinn groups definitions and approaches into these three categories in “The Letter and the Spirit,” 4-7. Sandra Schneiders further refines this classification in “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2 (Spring 1994): 9-14.

Traité de théologie spirituelle or Jordan Aumann's *Spiritual Theology*.⁷ Here spirituality (or, more specifically, Christian spirituality) is considered primarily in terms of its underlying theological principles, as having to do with the way in which persons subjectively appropriate and live out the objective Christian revelation; it concerns the *existential* impact of Christian dogma. As we can see from the titles of the books just mentioned, scholars favoring this approach tend to describe their work as "spiritual theology," as we are doing in this symposium, rather than speaking more broadly of "the study of spirituality." Such a "theological" approach has many advantages. It lends itself to well-organized presentation and is more easily related to other subject areas in a seminary curriculum. It brings out the normative character of Scripture and tradition for Christian spirituality, and incorporates the "formative" dimension especially desired in pastorally-oriented programs. Nevertheless, many North American scholars of spirituality now find a purely "theological" approach too limiting. For one thing, it seems to run the risk of reducing spirituality to a mere appendage of dogmatic and moral theology; the great spiritual figures and texts become theoretically dispensable once they have been mined for the timeless spiritual principles they convey. For another, its methodology often seems ahistorical and *a priori*, focused more on what authentic Christian spirituality *should be* rather than on what it *concretely is and has been*, in all its complex empirical richness; there seems to be little place for phenomena that do not easily fit into ordinary theological categories.

Historical/Contextual Approach

That is perhaps why today a significant number of U.S. and Canadian scholars in the field of spirituality prefer what has been called a *historical/contextual* methodology, which emphasizes "the historical rootedness of spirituality in a particular community."⁸ Here the approach is more descriptive than normative. Close attention is paid to actual historical and social

⁷ See Charles-André Bernard, *Traité de théologie spirituelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1986) and Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1980).

⁸ McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 6.

contexts, to the way in which a particular set of spiritual teachers, practices, beliefs, texts, and so on, functioned at a particular place and moment in human history. This approach has the advantage of being able to incorporate a broader range of empirical data as well as the modern tools of historical analysis; for example, one can more easily study and learn from the phenomena of popular religion as it has actually been practiced (e.g., in twentieth-century "base communities" or nineteenth-century rural American parishes), and from the historical figures and movements that have been traditionally ignored by mainstream "spiritual theology" (e.g., the beguines, the charismatics). Spirituality thus seems to become much more concretely incarnated. Among the disadvantages of this approach, however, is that it can appear as messy and unfinished as the historical human processes it studies; moreover, by limiting its analysis to expressions of spirituality that have left some historical traces, this approach leaves little place for the study of present experience (except as it passes into some recorded form).

Anthropological/Hermeneutical Approach

Thus a third group of U.S. and Canadian scholars favor what had been called an *anthropological/hermeneutical* approach, according to which spirituality is treated as a fundamental dimension of the human person, or, as one author puts it, "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms... of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."⁹ Here the focus is on the description, critical analysis, and constructive interpretation of spiritual *experience*, so that it may illuminate issues in the spiritual life today. "The study of spirituality as *experience*," says this same author, "requires us to bring into play not only theology and historical studies but psychology, sociology, the natural sciences, comparative religion, aesthetics, literature and the arts and whatever other disciplines might be required by the character of the phenomenon to be studied."¹⁰ Using such tools, one can better

⁹ See Sandra Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13 (Fall 1986):

¹⁰ See Sandra Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach," 10 (italics mine).

observe and interpret contemporaneous data (e.g., from prayer groups, spiritual direction), or more easily study the "spirituality" dimension of, say, child psychology, art therapy, and homeopathic medicine. On the other hand, with this approach the focus seems to shift from the "ultimate" itself to the human subject, and spirituality so broadly defined in terms of a relationship toward "ultimate value" becomes difficult to distinguish from religion itself.

Implications

These brief remarks are hardly adequate to explain the complex questions currently under discussion among scholars of spirituality in the United States and Canada. For a clearer and more detailed presentation, I invite you to consult the articles I have cited. But I bring these points to your attention, because what may sound at first like an argument over abstract principles turns out to have very practical consequences for the way in which "spiritual theology" is taught in my part of the world.

Thus, as I have already indicated, many scholars now prefer to speak of "spirituality" or "the study of spirituality" rather than "spiritual theology," because they see their emerging academic discipline as including far more than what "spiritual theology" has traditionally encompassed. Nowadays in the U.S.A. and Canada a typical masters or doctoral program in spirituality will generally include a biblical and theological component, but it may just as often include courses and workshops in ancient and medieval church history, religious psychology, spiritual direction, yoga and Eastern spiritual practices, "feminist" and "liberation" spiritualities, the spirituality of lay and married life, prayer and worship in the African-American or Hispanic tradition, the spiritual dimension of art, music, and dance, and so on. This training may seem unsystematic compared to the approach found in the old scholastic manuals, but it may more adequately reflect, and prepare students for, the spiritual pluralism of today.

Moreover, in my part of the world, what is true for spirituality programs in general is also true for the teaching of Carmelite spirituality in particular. At the Washington Theological Union, for example, we offer a certificate in Carmelite Studies, and I teach a component on the Carmelite tradition from the Teresian

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Reform to the present. I am in frequent contact with professors teaching similar courses in other schools. A typical college course on Teresa of Avila, for example, will often cover her familiar teaching on the four waters and the seven "dwelling places," her emphasis on the role of the humanity of Christ, and so on. But just as often these courses will include geographical data about the Iberian peninsula, historical information on the plight of the *conversos* in sixteenth-century Spain, comparisons with Jewish and Sufi mysticism, feminist analyses of the genre of the *Vida* and of Teresa's self-deprecating language, Jungian perspectives on her imagery, guided meditations on her texts, and so on. Indeed, in my part of the world some the most original and creative work on St. Teresa these days is coming not from theology departments but from scholars in the fields of history, romance languages, cultural studies, and women's studies; they bring questions to the texts that we Carmelites and "spiritual theologians" have not always thought to ask (perhaps in part because they are not constrained by a limited notion of what "spiritual theology" should include). Thus those who teach Carmelite spirituality, or spirituality in general, face special challenges today. Obviously no one expects them to be omniscient and omnicompetent. Yet they must be flexible and knowledgeable enough to make use of contributions from a variety of different fields and approaches.¹¹

Conclusion

Perhaps none of what I have said is news to you. Perhaps the same trends are occurring everywhere. I can only speak from my

¹¹ For example, in my own course on the modern Carmelite tradition (from 1600 to the present), I am finding that it is no longer enough simply to present the "timeless wisdom" of a few great saints and texts, but that I must also say something about such things as the ordinary attitudes, customs, ceremonies and devotions in Carmel that served as a vehicle for "Carmelite spirituality" during all the intervening centuries when the average Carmelite was not seriously studying the works of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Or again, in mentioning the Infant of Prague devotion, it now seems necessary not only to acknowledge its historical origins and underlying Christological principles but also to explore some of its actual political and ideological implications. These issues are not usually addressed in older works on "Carmelite spirituality."

own North American experience. Some may regard the present situation as one of great confusion and disorder in the field of spiritual theology. I prefer to see it as a time of exciting debates and emerging possibilities. Bernard Lonergan has famously observed: "When the classicist notion of culture prevails, theology is conceived as a permanent achievement, and then one discourses on its *nature*. When culture is conceived empirically, theology is known to be an ongoing process, and then one writes on its *method*."¹²

In our current "post-classical" world, attempts to encapsulate all of Carmelite spirituality in new manuals (as a "permanent achievement") may not be our highest priority. It seems to me entirely appropriate that we should first struggle with fundamental methodological questions regarding the identification, study, and teaching of "spirituality" in general and "Carmelite spirituality" in particular. And I believe that those working in this emerging field in the U.S.A. and Canada may offer worthwhile contributions to the ongoing discussion. Thank you for your time and attention!

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¹² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), xi (*italics mine*).

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