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SPIRITUALITY: SENSE AND GIST. ON MEANING, GOD AND BEING

ABSTRACT

The definition of spirituality is a notoriously difficult undertaking. Rather than continuingly pointing this out, two advances are suggested in this article: That the impossibility of a precise definition of spirituality is accepted, as is the case with many other important aspects of life, and that the inherently paradoxical nature of spirituality is more fully explored as a way of coming to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The latter is illustrated by briefly juxtaposing the concepts of God and non-God and of self-implication and estrangement. The most important books for furthering such analyses are listed.

1. INDEFINITE DEFINING

Most academic papers, articles and books on spirituality[1] contain, very early on, an almost liturgically predictable moment, in which the term "spirituality" is put forward to be described, defined and circumscribed. This liturgical moment usually has a set form: The (re)new(ed) interest in the matter of spirituality both in the world at large and in the smaller precincts of academia is indicated; the impossibility of capturing either the many aspects of the subject matter at hand or the nuances of the term is stressed; subsequently, more often than not, a definition of sorts is nevertheless attempted.

The sensed need to describe what the writing is about, is of course understandable. A working definition makes for easier reading. Clarity of communication remains, always, a goal with practical ends. What is more, though, this liturgical moment of description is typical of a discipline which remains, to many of its participants, new (cf. Lombaard 2006a:141-143). In many church[2] and other circles too, "spirituality" is a newly popular, yet strangely unfamiliar word. Strangely so, because this dimension of faith, this religiosity, has been with *homo sapiens* since its earliest cultural deposits and before (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:217-325).

1 When the word "spirituality" is capitalised in this article, the reference is to Spirituality as an academic subject.

2 The Roman Catholic Church remains the denomination with the strongest established tradition of reflection on spirituality. For a brief overview of the history of spirituality, see Waaijman (2006:1-4).

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Other such dimensions of humanity are equally ancient, similarly vague, and just as present in our time, yet beg no exact definitions from us. More strongly formulated, they positively defy sharp delineation (cf. Ponzio 2003:58-59). These facets of life include food, sex, music, dance, power, fear, love and hate, beauty and revulsion, life and death, sounds and silence, colours and movements, stillness — all of which we are thoroughly familiar with. Yet, description never quite captures these phenomena. In fact, any too firm a description will be experienced as limiting, even as destructive to the appreciation of what the phenomenon really is. In much the same way, spirituality too remains "better experienced than described. Words do not succeed … in portraying adequately … these 'sensations' of being human" (Lombaard 2003:433-434; cf. Kourie 2001:4; Gorringe 2001:1-27; Thijs 1990:57-67; McGrath 1999:1-2; Lombaard 2001:60-61). Perhaps appropriately, thus, spirituality remains — *in* and *to* all senses — a mystery.

In an effort to advance somewhat beyond the mode of the introductory text book, that is, this indefinite search for the finite defining of spirituality, I propose a different way of portraying this phenomenon called spirituality. Different, not in the sense of submitting something altogether new, but rather in attempting to tease out the nature and characteristics of spirituality in such a way that we journey at least a little distance together in gaining a common sense, that is, a broadly shared understanding, of what is referred to when this term is employed. In this way, when the word "spirituality" is used, each may still have an own mental picture — however vague or lucid — of what the term refers to. However, this indefiniteness will not in any essential sense be different from when we hear the sound "chair" or "apple." The gist is shared. The general picture, the essence awoken in our mind's eye by the term "spirituality," should in this way become somewhat clearer, to some increasing extent shared, thus enhancing our exchanges on this matter. A frame may be created within which we can all paint our own canvas, but now perhaps without the requirement, each time, for each picture, of a thousand words …

Such an "in-definite" understanding has the added hermeneutical value that it encourages very close "listening" when one encounters the word "spirituality":

- Frequently, without explicit indication, this word is used in scholarly circles to refer to three spheres: "lived experience, teachings, and the academic study of experience or teaching" (Donahue 2006:75, following Principe 1983: 135-137);
- In popular circles, the term has more diverse horizons, including references to existential quest(ion)s, religions and "philosophies", the expression of certain commitments within each of these religions and "philosophies," and personal experiences and expressions of faith (Lombaard 2003:433-435);

- Among theologians new to the discipline of Christian Spirituality, the resonance of the word "spirit" within this term at times induces them as a first reflex to investigate, essentially, Pneumatology (with the concomitant temptation not to take the relevant New Testament and dogmatologically-important source texts, within their various historical contexts, seriously);
- Based on the same resonance, believers in the charismatic tradition of worship (cf. Conradie 2006:110-111) are every so often said to "have spirituality", whereas the less ecstatic expressions of Christianity, then, presumably do not (a use of the term, thus, which is not only aesthetically, but also theologically awkward);
- In some church circles, the use of the word "spirituality" has become almost a fashion item of sorts, with the meaning less important than the rhetorical effect it generates;
- In a parallel way within broader society, particularly in sections of affluent, Western(ised) culture, including pop culture, "spirituality" has become a lifestyle trend, with professions to "being spiritual" intended to counter impressions of superficiality and materialism. This development can be seen in, for instance, the appointment of "spirituality editors" to e.g. Cosmopolitan magazine in the UK and to BellaOnline (www.bellaonline.com), and in books on "spiritual intelligence" (cf. e.g. Zohar & Marshall 2000), on which the news media, businesses and private tertiary educational institutions have picked up.[3]

These six nuances of meaning are only some of the possibilities which have occurred; in practice and in theory, many more exist.

"Spirituality" thus moves in mysterious ways. On encountering the word, it takes a discerning reader/listener/viewer/participant to decode the message at hand. An "in-definite" understanding of what spirituality is, would aid wary observation.

Lastly, it remains to be pointed out in summary that the term "in-definite" as used here thus carries two meanings: First, as we have just seen, that "spirituality" has a history of being used variedly; and second, that "spirituality" (in all its possible senses) remains open to the future, continually adjusting to fresh impulses. Both these senses apply to this kind of understanding of spirituality.

3 Cf. e.g. Buzan (2007:www.women24.com/W24/Display/w24Article/0,,1-2-4_2892,00.html), Scogings (2002:www.spiritualintelligence.co.za).

2. PARADOXES: TWO, BUT MORE …

The route we take with the next few paragraphs is intended to explore further the possibilities of an "in-definite" understanding of spirituality. The way in which we undertake this exploration, is by means of considering paradoxes.[4] As illustrations of this manner of coming to an understanding of spirituality, two of these paradoxes are briefly discussed here.

2.1 God and non-God

Is being spiritual the sole preserve of religious people? Clearly, phenomenologically speaking, being aware of a "higher" calling, of bigger issues than just mundane subsistence, of gods or a godhead, or God, is not limited to any single religion. Nor are these questions the domain of religion only. Herein, natural science, philosophy, literature, art, politics, economics and a whole series of what may be termed cultural activities partake (cf. respectively, e.g. Dawkins 2006; Hick 2004; Goedgebuure 1993; Thijs 1990; Kuitert 1986; Otto 2005). The very awareness that I am, and that therefore life exists, and the terrible ensuing realisation: Perhaps not life itself, but certainly I will have to face extinction in my own lifetime, places fundamental questions in front of us: "What then?", and prior to the arrival of that time: "What is this?"

Intense reflection about the nature of human life, and that it may or may not stand in relation to something above-human, that is, something holy, has been with humanity since "we" — *Homo sapiens* — began to draw, talk and believe. The earliest human cave drawings, found in France and Spain, undoubtedly show an intense spiritual awareness already present 40 000 years ago (Van Huyssteen 2006:233-267). As the continuing vigorous debate on Richard Dawkins's missionary atheist book, *The God delusion* (2006), has again shown, humanity's struggle with these questions are still very much with us.[5] Is there a God; Are there gods; even: Are we gods?

Usually related to this: Will there be an afterlife; formulated differently: Are we eternal; Will eternity be given us? Or not? The sublime humour should not escape us that, even though we stand in a tradition of 40 millennia and more of pondering these weighty issues, to each of us the answer will be given within, at most, a few decades. Or not!

4 For this approach, from the discipline of Journalism (and thus true to the interdisciplinary nature of Spirituality), De Klerk (1983) has been instructive.

5 In this sense Dawkins's publications are the bookish equivalent to Afrikaans rock group Fokofpolisiekar's (in)famous 2006 "Fok God"-pronouncement: Agree or disagree with the content and/or manner of expression, at least it gets people talking about more profound matters than sport and movie stars (cf. Lombaard 2006c:7). This, in another sense than the usual, is thus "higher education".

The different perspectives on these matters history has rendered us, collected and studied by historians of religion, comparative religionists, and philosophers of meaning and faith, help us, but to a point only. These collected works can list the possibilities, analyse different aspects, and inform our thoughts. The ultimate "decision" — too rationalistic a term, to be sure, since it is for most people an existential matter, transcending the rational — on the existence or not of God, and the impact that "decision" has on all aspects of one's life — *that* is a spiritual matter.[6] How one relates to God being there, or not, and how one gives expression[7] to that faith commitment, *that* is spirituality.

Within such an understanding of the term, it is consequently possible to speak of, for instance, atheist (cf. e.g. Comte-Sponville 2007) and secular (cf. e.g. the essays collected in Du Toit & Mayson 2006) spiritualities. One's manner of reacting to "conclusions" about the big questions of life influences in many important ways (though not exclusively — humans are too complex to be machinated entirely logically/predictably on the basis of even core principles) how one lives in relation to, among other matters, the earth, oneself, sexuality, recreation, and the sense of something "deeper."[8] That too is spirituality. On the other hand, returning to the precincts of more traditionally "believing" spiritualities, it now also becomes possible, next to the more familiar positive confessions about God, to retrieve more fully the *via negativa*, the apophatic mode of God-talk and life-talk (cf. Kourie 2005:2-4; on the *via negativa* culturally interpreted, see the essays collected in Laytham 2004), in which confessing the what-is-not about God is for some an existentially more satisfying, more modest, and more mystical way of going about the impossible-to-do, impossible-not-to-do of putting into words and images the mystery of ...[9]

2.2 Self-implication and estrangement

One of the recurring themes in the academic study of spirituality is the self-implicating nature of this subject. When reading spirituality, whether primary works on/of faith or secondary reflections on those sources, one hardly remains untouched. Not only intellectually — though this certainly too — but also emotionally, socially, and in the broadest horizons or deepest dimensions of one's being, *panta rei* — everything flows.

6 A "decision" in favour of atheism is therefore equally as religious a commitment as any to the contrary. Cf. e.g. Du Toit (2006:66-69) on "secular spirituality".

7 Giving expression includes the different dimensions analysed by Smart (1969), again brought to the spirituality agenda by Conradie (2006:88-13).

8 Cf. Kourie (2006a:80-88) on these aspects of secular spirituality.

9 There is more to the Jewish tradition of not pronouncing the divine name than is popularly realised …

In this respect, the discipline of Spirituality cannot claim uniqueness. In Theology in general; in philosophy, literature, languages; in all forms of intellectual and thus existential engagement with natural, economic, medical and other sciences, we find ourselves in different ways constantly being not only informed, but also formed and reformed; that is, defined and refined. The ideals of scholarly objectivity — post Kuhn (1962) and Popper (1963) clearly impracticable, and also unwanted (Lombaard 2002:1-57) — had earlier merely served to mask the seductions of one's discipline: As with the Lorelei, the voices we encounter in our readings entice us, ever closer. It is only with drastic effort, as with the sailors of such tales who forcefully block their ears to the siren's call, that we might remain *untouchable*. Even then, though, as with the Indian caste of that same name, it is not with admiration that we then view the isolation of such a disconnected position, but with sadness. There is so much more to involvement than to detachment; to quote Debray (1991:248): "Déterritorialisé = dématérialisé. Territorialisé = empâté."[10]

The madness of the method in modernist scholarship had always been that it inserted itself between the student and what is studied (cf. Lombaard 2006b:916-920), seeking to prevent the mutual implication of scholars and their work. This scholarly safe sex put a greater premium on the aspect of protection than on the aspect of intimacy; the latter, that is, human contact, was considered dirty, even immoral. It was forgotten that human understanding can come only from the intermingling of subject and subject matter; method would not render truth in any absolute sense, as had been the ideology of modernism (cf. Gadamer 1975). All method could surrender was certain aspects of reality, and even then still held hostage to the method's absolutist terms. In Spirituality, a discipline that sees its rise with that of post-modernism, it is — except with great self-deception — impossible to ignore the self-implicating nature of the subject matter. In exchanges — be it with texts, people, experiences … — one is changed. An obvious example within Christianity is the reading of the Bible. With the Bible we experience existentially not only that we understand, but also that we find ourselves understood (Rossouw 1963).[11] In addition to this writerly (that is, textually elicited) existentialism (to apply Thiselton 1992:98 anew), lie in each church tradition aspects of faith (cf. Conradie 2006:127) which address the individual and the community of believers so directly, that they hold this as central to their — precisely — spirituality.

10 Uncontextuality = non-material. To be contextual = to be engaged.

11 This metaphysical, or mystical, experience of encountering Scripture-and-God had been given expression in the Reformed solecisms, which are impossible to isolate from one another, and lay at the root of the schism between Rome and the Reformation, as it does now again between, one the one hand, established church theologies and, on the other, the liberalism of fundamentalism and the fundamentalism of classical liberalism.

However, spirituality is not only that which draws one in; it is at the same time also that which puts one at a distance. Although people who read/study spiritually are often more adept than others at describing their faith composition and expressions, simply because they have the linguistic and conceptual vocabulary more readily available to them, spirituality is not primarily business with the self. This is not pietism in its most other-worldly cloak. What one reads and encounters, most often leads one away from oneself and from one's set ideas

- to other writers;
- to other believers;
- to the world;
- to God.

To return to the example of the Scriptures again, this "estrangement" has historically led to much tension between Bible exegetes and traditional church views (cf. Donahue 2006:80-81), when exegetical findings had placed question marks behind what had earlier been confessional certainties. In the study of Spirituality (as in all academic encounters), we are led to "hold open the possibility that our ways of thinking and acting will be broken in the encounter" (Higton 2006:10). That is the exact negation of fundamentalism, which seeks always just more of the same truths, and pietism, which seeks always just more for me. This intensely critical nature of the discipline of Spirituality (cf. De Villiers 2006:99-121) should thus not be overlooked.

This openness of spirituality therefore does not imply, altogether, a calm serenity, either as spiritualities are practiced or as they are studied. Any spirituality implies within itself, always, tensions too:

- with the context;
- with its sources;
- with other current spiritualities;
- with both the past and the future of the individual/group concerned, as they imagine/understand it.

These dimensions have often been analysed in one form or another in the literature on Spirituality (cf. e.g. Waaijman 2006:10-12), not explicitly, as far as I am aware, though, with a specific view to these relational tensions.

2.3 And more …

Naturally, many more such paradoxical "and-and" or even "versus" relationships of aspects of spirituality may be analysed, in order to come to a greater "in-definite" understanding of spirituality. The point has been made sufficiently, for the moment, though, that herein lies creative avenues for further exploration. Such thematic opposites present themselves to us, in present cultural and ec-

clesial debates, in the scholarly literature from the various constituent disciplines of Theology and related fields, in the literary bequest of the earlier church, among other sources.

3. A PRACTICAL NOTE: SPIRITUALITY, READ

A fruitful way of nurturing an initial (in-definite) understanding of Spirituality, is to read the most influential writings in the field. The following recent publications[12] will give a sense of orientation, on which to expand further, according to one's interests:

- Perrin, D.B. 2007. *Studying Christian spirituality*. London: Routledge.
- Dreyer, E.A. & Burrows, M.S. Eds. 2005. *Minding the spirit. The study of Christian spirituality*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sheldrake, P. 2005a. *The new SCM dictionary of Christian spirituality*. London: SCM Press.[13]
- Kourie, C. & Kretzschmar, L. Eds. 2000. *Christian spirituality in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- Waaijman, K. 2000. *Spiritualiteit: Vormen, grondslagen, patronen*. Gent: Carmelitana.[14]
- Jones, C., Wainwright, G. & Yarnold, E. Eds. 2000. *The study of spirituality*. (Student edition.) London: SPCK.
- McGrath, A.E. 1999. *Christian spirituality. An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

However, sources such as these are reflective, and in this sense, secondary. The primary sources in this regard are valuable in a different way. It is through interaction with these sources that readers often find themselves influenced most profoundly. These include, within the Christian sphere certainly, the Bible.[15] However, Spirituality is a discipline with strong historical inclinations. The

12 I limit myself to books here. Cf. Kourie (2006b:32[7]) for the most important journals and academic societies.

13 The American edition, Sheldrake (2005b) is titled: *The new Westminster dictionary of Christian spirituality*.

14 English and German translations have also been published: Cf. Waaijman (2002 & 2004, 2005, 2007).

15 Despite confessions of some strands of Christianity, e.g. Calvinism, which accord all parts of the Scriptures equal authority, in practice the communities of believers through the ages have drawn on some parts of the Bible more than on others. In Spirituality circles, it is most definitely the New Testament in the Bible, the Psalms in the Old Testament, and Paul and John in the New Testament, which have received greater prominence.

thoughts and experiences of those who have gone before us, influence us still, at times dramatically, and often to an extent not fully acknowledged. Works on the history of Christian spirituality, such as those by Woods (2006), Healy (1999) and McGinn & Meyendorff (1985), offer an excellent starting point, at which to begin a lifetime of reading the primary sources.

Reading, though important, is not altogether living, is it? In a certain sense, for the religiously inclined at least, "faith *is* life" (Lombaard 2003:433-434). It is through personal accommodation of insights from this literature, in ways that can hardly be predicted nor fully analysed, that one can be enriched; that is, that one can extend the meaning of one's being, in order to be spiritually in/re/formed – for those without faith in God, just as is; for those called to such faith, *coram Deo*.

4. A MESSINESS TO BE APOLOGISED FOR?

> Because of spirituality's rich scope, neither an exclusive definition as lived experience nor a distinct understanding of its academic home will ever be possible. The overlapping between experience and practice creates a certain "messiness" but gives spirituality a dynamic quality and prevents it from being "conceptually frozen" (Donahue 2006:86-87).

Quite naturally, within a culture still much dominated by the modernist ideals of scientific certainty and the clear stability of meaning (cf. Lombaard 2008:5), and with matters religious, where many people seek (perhaps the only? — cf. Kourie 2006b:27-31) firm answers, an open-endedness such as this may well be experienced as discomfiting. To my mind, when it comes to matters of the ultimate, that is healthy, though, as we move "from the unexamined to the examined life, with all the painful opening up that that implies" (Higton 2006:11). In the cult-classic book by Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle* (1974 [1963]), something of this is worded with the tantalising opening line to the book: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies".

In another popular book, Douglas Adams's *The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy* (1979), after much chaos, towards the end of the book, and right at the edge of the universe, the main character gets to see God's memo to humanity, about the meaning of "all this." God's final message is, "We apologise for the inconvenience."

In a parallel way, if I have not satisfied a need with this article now, once and for all, to define spirituality, I apologise for the inconvenience. I welcome you to the journey, though, without wanting necessarily to sell you on this suggested path of a shared in-definite understanding of what spirituality is. Arrogance is a poorly fitting academic attitude in all fields of study, the more so

on matters which touch the central questions of life. After all, "knowledge is what enables one to be wrong" (Higton 2006:11), because "[t]he distortions that hold us are most often exceedingly difficult to see" (Laytham 2004:10). Existentially even more pleasing, though: "knowing that one does not know" is a "wonderful bewilderment" (Herman & Mandell 2006:6-16).

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Trefwoorde	*Keywords*
Spiritualiteit	Spirituality
Definiëring	Definition
God en nie-God	God and non-God
Selfimplisering en vervreemding	Self-implication and estrangement