

# Critical Interiority

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As a new claimant to the title of "academic discipline," Spirituality still has to show that it offers something unique in terms of object of study and methods. Those of us who identify our field as the academic discipline of spirituality have spent a good deal of time debating these questions. This is how I begin my answer: spirituality is concerned with "The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life." This definition, clearly, is intended to be generic, not specifying any particular tradition or type of spirituality. If the question were about Christian spirituality, I would say that our study deals with "The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life in Christ."

Here is the challenge: how do you study *that*? When one begins to think about it, one discovers that everything is potentially relevant. No aspect of human experience, culture, social life, physical life, or anything else can be excluded out of hand from concern about "The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life." So, the actual "what" that we study when we study spirituality can be anything: social groupings, texts, traditions, practices, experiences, dreams, daily life. At an initial level, that explains why the study of spirituality must be interdisciplinary, since different disciplines have established expertise in studying each of these things. But if that were all we could say, spirituality would be at most an interest area within the broad field of religious studies, not a discipline.

So, what makes spirituality a distinct academic discipline and, as such, one that has something unique to offer within the field of religious studies? My answer to that is that its specific concern gives it a specific methodological principle that focuses and guides its interdisciplinary study. My name for this methodological principle is "critical interiority." I am well aware that this term comes with baggage that makes it problematic for some scholars, but in this essay I hope to explain why I still think it is central for the academic discipline of spirituality today.

First key clarification is that, in this context, the opposite of "interiority" is not "exteriority." Rather, interiority is about being a subject as distinct from an object; that is, an agent of one's own destiny as distinct from a mere billiard ball knocked around by circumstances. Perhaps the opposite of interiority in this sense is "non-aliveness." Interiority, then, is the *sine qua non* of having

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"experiences." When scholars of spirituality affirm that spirituality as a discipline deals fundamentally with the experience of a dynamic spiritual process in which one is engaged, this presumes that the one having the experience is (minimally) conscious of what is going on and capable of some level of reflection on it.<sup>1</sup> This is the basis of what I am calling "interiority."

It is important to name the contexts out of which I have come to this perspective. The first and most basic is the contemplative traditions of Roman Catholicism, within which notions of spirituality and interior life have a deep and long history. Within these traditions, "interiority" is the inner dwelling with God that funds an integrated life of prayer, worship, community, and self-giving service. Nowadays we sometimes hear these longstanding contemplative traditions caricatured as dualistic, individualist, anti-body, and/or overly focused on prayer at the expense of daily life and social responsibility. While aspects of these critiques may sometimes be valid, it is important to avoid "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." My effort is aimed at reclaiming the "baby" (that is, this contemplative tradition of interiority) by linking it to some key recent movements in philosophy and theology.

A second context, then, is Bernard Lonergan's reflections on method in theology. In his book of that title, Lonergan presents interiority as a science of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> The ground of interiority is simply self-awareness in the midst of the operations of our consciousness. Lonergan asserts that interiority becomes the foundation of method when we "know what we are doing when we are doing it;" that is, when we have consciously appropriated the inner data of our consciousness at work.

Lonergan's notion of interiority is important for the study of spirituality, I believe, because it deals exactly with "the living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life." For Lonergan interiority is grasped only insofar as one discovers it in one's own living, concrete consciousness that has a fundamental urge and an innate directionality toward the fullness of life. I think that is why it is a difficult concept to explain; it is grounded in a practice, and, as with all practices, studying the theory will never be very enlightening unless one is also engaging in the practice and paying attention to how it works.

One of the key elements that interiority offers to the study of spirituality is a principle for the critique of spiritual phenomena. In the classroom as well as in the culture today, the tide of opinion runs strongly toward an attitude of broad and often uncritical tolerance that can leave one at a loss as to how to make any evaluative assessment of one's own or others' spirituality. When pressed, students tend to fall back on an uncritical appeal to "sharing my experience" in the hopes that this will somehow demonstrate authenticity. Training in the practice of interiority has potential to assist them in discovering critical

evaluative principles within their own experience. This occurs as one heightens sensitivity to how one's actual ways of perceiving, understanding, making judgments, and acting are, in fact, moving toward the fullness of life—or, perhaps, are not. On this basis one can begin to develop practical, experience-based criteria for assessing the spiritualities one encounters.

A third context that I have also found helpful for developing this approach to spirituality is postmodern philosophy. For my purposes here, I am using Calvin O. Schrag's *The Self After Postmodernity* as my primary reference.<sup>3</sup> In his final chapter Schrag discusses how experiences of "transcendence" can be understood in a postmodern, non-metaphysical yet also non-reductionist text. His answer draws upon Kierkegaard: They are events in a concrete human life-story in which something "excessive," something "beyond the bounds" (in recent French philosophy: *démésure*) inexplicably breaks in. The person must make a choice—and that choice radically changes the story.

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I think this is a good description of something that is key to the study of spirituality. Spirituality as a discipline does not directly deal with the metaphysical explanation of such events; rather, spirituality deals with the *stories* of such events and the choices they engender in concrete human lives. The connection with interiority is that in the stories that people tell about such events, they are recounted as peak moments of consciousness, conviction, and self-appropriation. Paradoxically, they are also recounted as events of "unknowing," as ordinary human capacities of understanding are surpassed by the "excessive" character of the event. In concrete human lives, I would contend, such events are central for gaining insight into "dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life."

Interiority as a methodological principle for spirituality, then, has three major implications, each of which derives from one of the above contexts. The first concerns what we know; the second concerns how we know; the third concerns how we deal with events of "unknowing" (that is, *démésure*, or "excessiveness").

First, interiority as a methodological principle affirms that in studying persons and communities—whether contemporary or historical—attention to evidence of their living and interiorly apprehended process of "dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life" is key to our study being, in fact, a study of spirituality. As mentioned previously, the "what" that we study can be almost anything, from dreams to poetry to clothing practices. My contention is that what makes our study a study of spirituality is that it focuses on how these things are linked to that process of transformation. It is not that the process is only "interior" (as over against "exterior"), but rather that it must engage the human person at a depth that includes the longing for what the contemplative traditions call "dwelling with God."

Second, interiority as a methodological principle affirms that when it comes to spirituality "it takes one to know one." That is: the most basic resource for knowing "The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life" is oneself as, in fact, in the midst of being such a person. The contemplative tradition puts this in terms of a purifying process of deepening self-knowledge and wisdom. Bernard Lonergan argues that this must be a rigorous, even "scientific," process. The key to it is a heightening of one's awareness, appropriation, and ability to articulate the specificity of one's operations of perceiving, understanding, judging and acting as either moving towards the fullness of life, or not.

Third, interiority as a methodological principle affirms that a fundamental key to understanding transformation toward the fullness of life in concrete human lives is attention to nodal events in which both convicted knowledge and awareness of "unknowing" are at peak intensity. While not every study in spirituality deals directly with such events, I would contend that the question of their possibility is implicit in every such study. While such events are not the goal of the spiritual life, they represent the breakthrough points where the urgent movement toward the fullness of life is experienced and claimed at a new, more radical and holistic level of one's being.

In my view, the "misuses" of spirituality that we see both in popular culture and sometimes in academic study flow from the failure to engage interiority—in the three aspects that I have described—in a critical manner.

A failure to be adequately critical in the first aspect (that is, to clarify why this is a study in spirituality) can lead either to reductionism, in which "spirituality" is explained only within the confines of one discipline, or to eclecticism, in which various disciplines are engaged without any clear sense of what focuses and organizes them. A failure to be adequately critical in the second aspect (that is, to appropriate one's own interior knowing process) can lead either to rationalism, in which spirituality becomes entirely a matter of analysis and clear categories, or to subjectivism, in which uncritical appeal to "my experience" trumps all. A failure to be adequately critical in the third aspect (that is, to understand the character and role of those "nodal" events) can lead either to a kind of hedonism, in which the role of peak experiences as gifts that found and fund lifelong commitment is inverted to make them the striven-for goal of spiritual life, or to a complete disavowal of the value and role of so-called peak experiences, so that the spiritual life is radically flattened out into the mundane.

It is worth noting that these abuses are not limited to the academic study of spirituality; they can resonate in one's own spiritual life, as well. As Lonergan would put it: when the object of study has to do with the life of the spirit (small s or big S), growth in personal authenticity and growth in being an ad

equate scholar necessarily go together. Bearing this in mind, it is clearly quite a challenge to prepare people to be adequate scholars of spirituality. One aspect of this training, I think, must be strong emphasis on the fact that a lifelong process of learning and growth will be necessary. In one sense this is true for any field; but for spirituality the demand that it makes upon the scholar is both more complex and more personal.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, the much quoted definition of Sandra M. Schneiders, who writes that the object of the study of spirituality is "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives." Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," in *Minding the Spirit*, Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005): 5-6.
2. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971); Terry J. Tekippe, *What is Lonergan Up to in Insight* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996), ch. 21, interprets interiority in terms of a "science of consciousness."
3. Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

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Definition of Christian Spirituality: The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life in Christ.

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Interiority is the sine qua non of having "experiences"

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