

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND WHAT IT OFFERS PEOPLE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

There is a need for study of the contemporary value of Christian spirituality today within the context of theological conventions. A personal synthesis of a university theology course addresses the issue. How Christians cultivate their spiritual lives in ways relevant to life and ministry in current Australian society life and culture are reviewed by numerous authors. Pressing questions pertinent to Christian practices and religious life for our times are critically examined.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, Christian, ministry, Australian, society

The study of Christian spirituality offers the opportunity to appreciate practical implications of critical Christian theological conventions within Christian life and spirituality today. This paper provides a personal synthesis of the elements of Christian spirituality taken from a Course on the topic relative to people in the 21st Century. The paper argues how individual readings proffer a pure gratefulness for the abundant and beneficial resources of spirituality existing within the Christian traditions.¹

The paper converses with various Christian spiritual classics surveying Christian practices of religious life of meaning within

¹ Joan Chittister and Mary Hembrow Snyder, *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001),186-187.

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contemporary Australian life and culture. Numerous authors are referred to in the context of the topic's readings, namely, John Shea, Anne Hunt, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Constance Fitzgerald, and Denis Edwards.

Primarily, it is essential to acknowledge the significant implications of the term Christian Spirituality. The term 'Christian Spirituality' is defined as 'any longing of the human heart.'² The word derives its origins from a Christian context, with an examination of spirituality suggesting that "the spiritual cannot be taken for granted but has to be sought, enacted, and realized."³ Augsburg defines spirituality as, "the real stuff of genuine spirituality, invariably boils down to some practice or apprenticeship in living that we call discipleship."⁴ The Christian Spirituality Course confirmed this notion, presenting insights and impetus to the desire for continued understanding and growth in this realm of Christian education.

An exploration of spirituality within a 21st-century school of Christian theology highlights the role of Trinitarian theology. This due to Christian spirituality's celebrating the Spirit's being and power most fully in the light of the one God understood as three persons in communion.⁵ Additionally, there is the relationship of a God revealed, for example, "In Trinitarian theology, the object upon which we reflect is another 'subject' or self, namely, the God who relentlessly pursues us to become partners in communion."⁶

The seminar authors reviewed during the Course have tendered perspectives into Christian spirituality and its relevance to 21st-century society. Powerful theological arguments and insightful personal points of appreciation are presented raising questions for further consideration. These authors have drawn past spiritual

² Course notes, week1, 29/07/10, p1.

³ Ibid., p.1.

⁴ David W. Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006).7.

⁵ Course notes, week1, 29/07/10, p.2.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

truths into the present for future theoretical relevance. Hence, each author has offered in some way and somehow a window into Christian spirituality shuttered beforehand. For example, John Shea in *“An Experience Named Spirit”*⁷ mentions the value of storytelling as heard through story listening.

Shea argues that this process highlights how the memory of Jesus activates a new experience of the Spirit. Thus, the process instigated through the Jesus story assists in moving to a contemporary understanding. Significantly, Shea notes: “In remembering Jesus Christ, He becomes present.”⁸ Additionally, Sheldrake asserts, “The equality of all people and their experience before God, irrespective of gender, culture and lifestyle, is fundamental to the Gospel and should, therefore, be the bedrock on which the Christian spiritual tradition rests.”⁹

However, in Anne Hunt’s *“Julian of Norwich,”*¹⁰ Hunt emphasises God’s abiding warmth and civility and the enduring communal inclusion of God and the human person. Hunt considers the heart of Julian’s insight is, “the notion of the mutual indwelling of God and the soul, our being closed and enclosed in the immense love that is the Trinity.”¹¹ Julian stresses the fundamental transformation that grace accomplishes in the soul, a change so significant and so beautiful that “all will be well.”¹² Dupre and Saliers add to this sense of ‘wellness’ by remarking how, “For Pascal, grace consists in an ever-new encounter with that presence.”¹³

⁷ John Shea, *An Experience Named Spirit* (Chicago: The Thomas Press, 1983)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991).

¹⁰ Anne Hunt, “Julian of Norwich” in *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics* (Hindmarsh, S. Aust.: AFT Press, 2010).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³ Louis Dupre and Don E. Saliers, *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 129.

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Related to encountering God, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez in "*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*"¹⁴ Observe how the soul departs on a 'dark night,' is drawn to God and comes alive with love for God alone. As stated, "This dark night is a privation and purgation of all sensible appetites for the external things of the world, the delights of the flesh and the gratifications of the will."¹⁵

Additionally, this denial is fashioned in the purging of the senses. In today's secular 21st century world, this denial for purging is even more so difficult to appreciate. Thus, the practice of Christian spirituality offers contemporary Christian enlightenment upon this dark night and soul journey. Regarding Christian spirituality McGinn comments, "Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialized forms."¹⁶

Conversely, Constance Fitzgerald in "*Impasse and the Dark Night*"¹⁷ offers a feminist-oriented interpretation of John of the Cross's concept and symbolism of the 'Dark Night.' Fitzgerald's suggests how a new understanding be brought to the contemporary experience through what she refers to as 'impasse.' Firstly, Fitzgerald argues that our spirituality and experience of God arise from and return to our historical circumstances to maintain and nourish them.¹⁸ Secondly, that there are numerous 'dark night' or 'impasse' experiences, personal and societal, that yearn for meaning and significance. Essentially, Fitzgerald's

¹⁴ Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite studies, 1979.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

¹⁶ Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, World Spirituality (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

¹⁷ Constance Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night" in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*. Edited by Joann Wolski, Conn (New York: Paulist Press, c1996), 288.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

concern is “not only the so-called dark night of the soul but the dark night of the world.”¹⁹

Finally, in Denis Edwards’s “*Prayer of Intercession*”²⁰ The God Edwards portrays is one who can and does answer prayers as God encounters us personally in a life of grace, always acting providentially for good. This belief suggests an appreciation of our God as one who loves us as a parent loves a child and conversely as a child loves a parent.²¹ Indeed, this surely is our birthright and desired relationship with God as creatures of the Creator. Appreciably, Edward's reading on intercessory prayer affirms that consciously or not we are in a relationship with God, for desire in itself is prayer.²² Nolan expresses this desire concerning ‘hunger’ stating, “... the sigh is rather the widespread ‘hunger’ for spirituality, the search for spirituality, the felt need for spirituality.”²³

In conclusion, the Christian Spirituality Course offered the prospect of valuing how Christians cultivate their spiritual lives in ways relevant to life and ministry in contemporary Australian society. Moreover, how an understanding and aptitude as educated interpreters and practitioners of Christian spirituality today provides gateways to advance spiritual experiences and practices in the contemporary world.

Regarding addressing the present moment and facing the future, the spiritual authors of the Course throw light onto the pressing questions of our time. Each author has contributed an essential thread in the warp and weft of this tapestry of truth. Whether the focus has been on storytelling and listening, ‘wellness,’ the ‘dark

¹⁹ Ibid., 288.

²⁰ Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010).

²¹ Edwards, *How God Acts*, 179.

²² Ibid., 176.

²³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006).7.

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night,' 'impasse' or 'intercession' the responses have provided a cloak for personal, ecclesial and social change.

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