



Contemporary Spirituality and Study of the Bible: Introducing a Relationship



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It is in one sense yesterday's news that so many people wish to identify themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. This phenomenon, however, continues to dominate the current scene, as the recent report from the Theos think tank and the media company CTVC, entitled 'The Spirit of Things Unseen', confirmed.¹ It found that despite the decline of formalised religious belief and institutionalised religious belonging over recent decades, a spiritual current runs as powerfully, if not more so, through the nation as it ever did. A post-religious nation, the report concluded, is by no means a post-spiritual one.

Any introduction to the relation between this broad and hugely contested area of contemporary spirituality and the equally large and complex entity of study of the Bible is bound to be inadequate at best. What follows can, therefore, only be a preliminary and highly selective account of the nature and origins of present-day interest in spirituality with some brief observations and questions about how serious study of the Bible might interact with it.

Spirituality as aspiration for fulfilment

For a long time spirituality, in a variety of forms to be sure, had always been attached to a particular religious tradition and imbued with its beliefs and practices. Detached from such roots, a more general spirituality is, for some, at best the object of suspicion. Not only does the term conjure up a dualism of spirit over against matter but it also appears to encourage an obsessive navel-gazing and cultivation of non-verifiable esoteric inner experiences. But the emergence in the 1980s of the study of spirituality in its broad sense both as

a distinct academic discipline and as a sub-discipline in other fields suggests that there is more to talk of spirituality than simply a feel-good Esperanto that could be shared by anyone. Major books and series have been published,² academic journals in the field have proliferated,³ universities and colleges offer both modules and whole degree courses in Spirituality, and new academic societies have been created.⁴

It should occasion no particular surprise or worry that in such academic discussion 'spirituality' remains a slippery term whose definition is debated. The same is true when it comes to defining what constitutes a religion. What, then, do the more serious writers on the subject, whose concern goes beyond such matters as the use of crystals or Tarot cards, mean when they talk about spirituality and do not see it as necessarily religious? The recurring themes here are the lived experience of those values that go beyond pure materialism, the fostering of individual and communal well-being and wholeness, a sense of connectedness with the earth and the planet, and the contemplation and actions that can bring about the awareness and demonstration of such values.

One of the more helpful resources for thinking about such spirituality and how it functions in a predominantly secular society is the work of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, particularly in his influential book, *A Secular Age*. In his extensive depiction of how a secular age is the result of what has happened to the spiritual over the last 500 years of Western civilisation, he treats the spiritual as the sense of the aspiration for a flourishing existence, whether experienced against a transcendent background or within an immanent

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1. *The Spirit of Things Unseen: Belief in Post-religious Britain* (London: Theos, 2013).

2. E.g., and this names but a few influential titles almost at random, ed. EH Cousins, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad) – a 25 volume series; P Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991); K Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); P Heelas and L Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way To Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

3. These range from the multidisciplinary journal, *Studies in Spirituality*, to the *Journal of Spirituality, Leadership and Management*.

4. E.g. the founding in 2009 of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality, involving not only academics but also professionals from the fields of spiritual care and formation.

5. C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA. and London: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3. His analysis of the various stages in this development is full of insights but cannot be discussed here.

6. Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 22.

framework. He tackles the big question of how we in the West have moved 'from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others'.⁵ For Taylor, what has not been sufficiently recognised in this major shift is that the conditions of our experience of and search for the spiritual have become decisively different. He thinks that in a secular age both those who understand their lives as believers and those who understand them as unbelievers are in a new situation. One of the reasons for this is that Taylor refuses any simple metanarrative of secularisation whereby the spiritual increasingly gives way to the secular, or where the spiritual shaping of the secular is ignored, or where exclusive humanism is seen as the inevitable conclusion of a rational process of the stripping away of the superstitions of an enchanted universe.⁶ Instead, he is at pains to show in his own account how the position of exclusive humanism is as much a constructed reality as any religious belief and what forces were in play in this construction beyond any supposed empirical observation and scientific theorising. His story is one of how spiritual and moral values were crucial in the development of secularism and of how spirituality within a closed framework is a distinctively post-Christian phenomenon that owes its strengths and weaknesses to its dialectical relationship to the Christian tradition.

In sketching what constitutes this spiritual aspect of life that both believers and unbelievers have to negotiate under the common conditions of a secular age, Taylor argues that we all see our lives as having a certain moral or spiritual shape revolving around our aspirations for a full and flourishing existence.⁷ His shorthand term for such aspirations is 'fullness'. In his own words: 'Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be ... Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g. of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfilment, where we feel ourselves there'.⁸

Spirituality, on this view, takes in but is not reduced to special experiences or the inner life, is concerned with both the presence and absence of that which fulfils us, and includes what drives and shapes ordinary living. Depicting spirituality as the aspiration for fullness, as Taylor also argues, opens up the possibility of dialogue between those who hold that a transcendent dimension is necessary for this aspiration to be met and those who operate within a closed immanent worldview and think that evoking some transcendent goal undermines a fully satisfying human life. In contemporary culture both of these main competing narratives about what constitutes fullness have their attractions and both also have similar tensions, dilemmas and points at which they come under pressure. The latter include how to deal with violence, the role of the body, erotic desire and nature,

living with suffering and evil, humanitarian solidarity, justice and reconciliation, a fixation with attempting to capture ethical decisions in codes, facing death and the spectre of meaninglessness.⁹ For Taylor the dilemmas mean that there can be no easy certainties for either side in the dialogue and that contemporary Christians in their advocacy of a transcendent source of life should not think of themselves as simply offering solutions but rather as providing intimations and anticipations of how the dilemmas might be overcome. One of the reasons that expressions of lived spirituality will be partial and provisional is that they are always embedded in particular cultures and their social imaginaries. The latter are the taken for granted assumptions of a culture about the world, our place within it and what is necessary for a full and virtuous life, and they are most frequently expressed not in theoretical terms but carried in images, stories and symbols.¹⁰ There can be gains and losses for Christian spirituality as its tradition both participates in and yet reconfigures a particular cultural imaginary.

Contemporary spiritual concerns and biblical studies

What does serious study of the Bible that employs the whole range of critical tools available for interpretation bring to this discussion? Although the Christian tradition in its various forms has always nurtured an emphasis on spirituality rooted in the Bible and devotional reading of Scripture is a common practice, in the modern era few biblical scholars, until recently, have pursued their work by making connections either with this tradition or present-day interest in the broader phenomenon of spirituality. That situation has begun to change due in no small part to the influence of the pioneering work of Sandra Schneiders, who has advocated readings of Scripture that respect contemporary criteria of interpretation and yet at the same time reflect Scripture's role in mediating the experience of faith.¹¹ In particular, asking questions about the spirituality presented in biblical texts and their potential for transforming their readers' lived experience adds a further dimension to academic study. From within their own framework how do such texts address issues of human flourishing and the longing for fullness? Here accounts of fruitfulness, wholeness and peace (*shalom*), and abundant life are obvious candidates for re-examination, as are treatments of what have been named earlier as pressure points for current spiritualities, such as whether and how violence, asceticism and renunciation, suffering and death are compatible with a vision of personal and communal flourishing. Traditional 'spiritual' topics such as prayer and worship will also figure in such study, as these aspects of attunement to a transcendent reality are also seen in relation to everyday living, social harmony and political justice. What do the biblical texts have in common with the aspirations of the cultures in which they were produced, how far do they reflect these and how far do they reconfigure and redirect these from within their own faith perspective? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the spiritualities they present? How have these biblical spiritualities played out, positively and negatively, in their reception in the church and society?

Pursuing such questions and bringing critical readings of the Bible directly into the dialogue with contemporary concerns about spirituality has benefits beyond expanding academic horizons. Its results can be made accessible to those in an increasingly biblically illiterate culture where many of the 'non-religious' are unaware of the rich resources for the spiritual quest and reflection on human flourishing in the sacred text of a religion on which they may be turning their backs.

Christian spirituality and biblical studies

Study of biblical texts in the light of such broad concerns but from a stance of Christian 'faith seeking understanding' will clearly mean going beyond simply seeking information about spirituality from them and involve being open to transformation by them. Such openness entails self-critical dialogue with the texts and has elements of judgment and appropriation. Part of the critical awareness of one's own developing spirituality in relation to study of the Bible is discerning how that spirituality is already situated within and influenced by the specific tradition of Christian spirituality in its varied expressions. Indeed, as our earlier discussion implied, whatever we make of its more generic definition, spirituality as lived experience only exists in concrete particularities, shaped by specific traditions, whether religious or secular, and their accompanying social imaginaries.

Christian spirituality is itself a contested tradition in which different construals of the biblical witnesses have played their part. There would, however, be broad agreement that decisive for the Christian tradition of experiencing full flourishing is not simply an openness to some transcendent dimension to life but a transformative relation to the God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated through the Spirit, and that the relationship to this ultimate source does not simply leave the secular as secular but is lived out in the world in the context of the Church and its practices in particular times and places. Shaped by the good news of Christ's death and resurrection, this is a spirituality in which fulfilment comes not simply from an individual exploration of the self but is found as the self becomes de-centred and drawn into relationship with the triune God, with others and with the created world. It entails not merely an experience of transcendence that leaves the secular in tact but one that enables created reality to be seen as sacramental, shot through with signs of God's gracious presence. Since what God has accomplished in Christ has an eschatological dimension, in this spirituality health and wellbeing are not the primary index of flourishing. The harsh realities of life, including suffering and death, are part of an account in which creaturely finite human flourishing depends on the reality of a relationship with God that has a future in the renewal of all things.¹²

Biblical resources have clearly already contributed to this summary of what lies at the heart of the Christian tradition but its rehearsal also serves as a reminder that study of biblical spirituality is only one part, though a surprisingly neglected foundational one, of the whole

discipline of Christian spirituality including the areas of theology, history and personal and ecclesial formation. Study of the biblical witnesses needs to be in continual dialogue with this whole tradition as well as with the current concerns of our culture. After all, it is in the context of the ongoing tradition that grappling with the interpretive questions raised by the biblical sources takes place. What is the unity among the diverse biblical witnesses to spirituality? How do we relate Old Testament perspectives to New Testament perspectives? How do we appropriate biblical spiritualities and yet do so within a very different social imaginary from those in which they were produced? When are critiques of elements in the foundational witnesses necessary precisely in order to remain faithful to their central vision? What criteria has the Church in its theological reflection, its liturgical tradition and its practices found helpful in making such judgments? Can attempts to read the Bible for spirituality that employ current critical tools still learn from earlier, especially pre-modern, ways of reading the Bible spiritually?

While the continuing tradition of Christian spirituality provides the primary context within which the believing reader explores such questions, renewed study of the spiritualities of the biblical witnesses can both confirm and challenge aspects of that tradition. It can invigorate a theology of spirituality and contribute to creative preaching, teaching and pastoral care that have spiritual formation as their goal, while also helping to inform judgments about whether aspects of the tradition are faithful appropriations of the gospel or involve too great an assimilation to the culture in which they are expressed. Such study may also have a role to play in individual devotional reading of Scripture, where, for example, *lectio divina* is undergoing a popular revival. While using the results of academic study of the text is usually encouraged at the initial *lectio* stage, both here and in the stages leading to *contemplatio* there lies the potential for a surplus of further meanings generated through the encounter with the text by an individual in prayer before God in very different historical circumstances from those that shaped the text. Might it be the case that both a critically informed reading of biblical texts as human words addressing audiences in their historical context and an openness to those words as a transformative divine address are needed if the surplus of meaning in any spiritual reading is not to become either arbitrary and subject to individual whim or simply productive of a predictable and safe experience of the God believers think they already know before any encounter with the text?

All sorts of exciting and fruitful possibilities for fresh readings, reflections and questions open up when study of the Bible is drawn into relationship with spirituality. Yet, in the dialogue about human flourishing that this entails, spiritualities will ultimately be measured not by the plausibility of their ideas but by the quality of life they produce. How far they exhibit the transformed living that they are exploring will therefore remain the acid test for advocates of a biblically informed Christian spirituality.

7. Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 16.

8. Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 5.

9. Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age*, pp. 602–726.

10. On the notion of 'social imaginary' see Taylor, *Secular Age*, pp. 171–6.

11. Cf. e.g. S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); 'Biblical Spirituality' Interpretation 56 (2002), pp. 133–42.

12. Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age*, e.g. p. 66; D. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), Vol. 1, pp. 314–19, 569–70.