The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality

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Introduction

Christian spirituality is in. Christian colleges and seminaries are now regularly offering courses on spiritual formation, spiritual direction, and related topics. Students are practicing spiritual disciplines, reading devotional classics, and listening to others’ stories of faith. Some will have questions about the conceptual frameworks within which the disciplines have been practiced or within which the dynamics of relationship with God have been understood. What is all this talk about “dark nights of the soul”? How do I relate the spirituality of Teresa of Avila to that of Jonathan Edwards or Maximus the Confessor? Others may wonder how the diverse practices of lived spirituality square with fundamental Christian beliefs. How does the practice of charismatic prayer or common Eucharist relate to our justification with Christ? Some may have valuable exposure to Christian spirituality in part but are interested in seeing a vision of the whole. It is with a view to these kinds of people and these kinds of questions that The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality is written. I have designed this book to fill the need for a topical survey text in Christian spirituality. My hope, therefore, in writing this text is to provide an illuminating and interesting topical survey of Christian spirituality.

Perspectives

As a survey of Christian spirituality, this book aims to present the characteristics of spirituality as seen through the Christian faith, generally speaking. The question we ask in this book is, simply, What does relationship with God look like for Christians? For this reason I draw from and write to Christians from the three major traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant). (Unfortunately, I am unequipped to speak from the variety of forms of Christianity currently flowering in Africa, Asia, and South America. For more on these forms see, for example, Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, and Lamin Sanneh, Whose Religion is Christianity?) I summarize the main features of Christian spirituality by pulling together those elements that are common to Christians from various traditions. I illustrate the variety of form in Christian spirituality by giving examples from particular traditions. I have neither space to nor interest in arguing for the superiority of one tradition over another. Where appropriate I have discussed strengths and weaknesses inherent in different approaches to relationship with God. Finally, the history of Christian spirituality reveals a rich mixture of truth...
and ambiguity, and I have tried to honor this mixture in my presentation.

As a topical survey of Christian spirituality, this book provides an understandable summary of the diversity of Christian thought and practice regarding the main topics of the field. This book does not treat, for example, comparative or apologetic spirituality. Rather than viewing Christian prayer in comparison with Buddhist meditation, this text will simply summarize how Christianity itself—in its common and diverse aspects—prays. Similarly, while I try to present Christian spirituality in a coherent framework, I do not spend time defending the reasonability of the framework. Furthermore, with regard to references and endnotes, this text simply points to the wisdom of the family of God insofar as our brothers or sisters contribute to the topic at hand. I do not take the time to indicate where and how I may disagree with other aspects of someone’s approach. My reference to another simply means that I affirm at least this aspect of his or her thought. Once again, neither space nor my own interests permit the dialectic necessary to differentiate myself from others in every point.

As a topical survey, the text is weighted somewhat in favor of the general rather than the particular. The trend in many introductions to Christian spirituality has been to lean toward the particular, surveying the field from a historical perspective and offering summaries of major themes at points along the way. Indeed, this trend has been necessary in order to free the study of spirituality from ties to dogmatics, which became burdensome when trying to forge an authentically interdenominational and interdisciplinary field of study. Nonetheless, I believe that now we can offer a sense of the whole that points to the general (recognizing that even this assigns the author a dangerous “perimeter-drawing” task) while respecting the particular. The text interfaces the particular into the general by means of illustrative examples, historical portraits, and what I have called “issue essays.”

How to Use this Book

I tend to be a “big picture” kind of guy. My students tell me that they get the most out of my teaching when I show how a number of different things fit together. And while I constantly face the dangers of a distorting totalization, I find that my preoccupation with big pictures often helps students see things in a new light. I hope to accomplish something of the same in this text. So, in order to make this book illuminating, I have incorporated a couple of elements characteristic of my own study and teaching of Christian spirituality.

First, this text draws from a variety of different resources. As we will see in chapter 2, the study of Christian spirituality—as an exploration of the relationship between God and human persons—necessarily involves both theological categories (requiring biblical, dogmatic, and historical study) and categories from the human sciences (requiring psychological and sociological study). Furthermore, the exploration of Christian spirituality involves both formal academic research and informal personal experience. Prayer, for example, has been explored not only by the saints and mystics of history, but also by medical researchers, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers of religion, as well as by people like you and me. What insights might these diverse resources bring to our understanding of Christian prayer? My aim is not to provide a comprehensive coverage of any single discipline (for example, I tend to draw more from cognitive psychology than other branches of psychology due to my own background and interests), but rather to point to the key questions, figures, and ideas that shed light on the general survey of Christian spirituality and to illustrate how an interdisciplinary approach to Christian spirituality might look.

Second, this text provides a survey of Christian spirituality within a single coherent framework (the “big picture”). My goal is to give some insight concerning how various traditions, practices, and
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perspectives can be comprehended as a whole. To this end the text will develop, though not defend, a way of looking at the God-human relationship that helps make sense of a number of details regarding the spiritual life. The chapters are designed to present this framework piece by piece and then to apply this framework to the practical dimensions of Christian spirituality as the book progresses. For this reason the book moves from the more difficult material to the easier, progressing from method to theology to dynamics to practice. Pay careful attention to the charts and diagrams presented in the text. Pay attention to the structure of chapters 3 through 7. These charts and chapters provide the basic framework within which the practical aspects of relationship with God are explored. This introduction to Christian spirituality might seem tough in the beginning, but I believe it will be well worth the effort in the end.

But I hope this text is not only illuminating, but interesting as well. To this end the following features have been included:

• **Chapter outlines and chapter objectives** at the start of each chapter provide a general orientation to the flow of the chapter and to the tasks you should be able to perform upon completion of the chapter—encouraging you to begin with the end in mind.

• **Sidebars** summarize materials in the text or provide brief quotes from primary sources.

• **Focus boxes** provide you with portraits of historical figures and movements, or with essays on key issues in Christian spirituality.

• **Charts, pictures, cartoons**, and such provide helpful visual illustrations and highlight key information.

• **A glossary** at the end of the book defines unfamiliar terms or terms that are used distinctively in this text. These terms are displayed in bold in the text at their first significant appearance. It is recommended that you look up the term in the glossary when you first encounter it. At times the glossary will direct you to a fuller discussion of the term later in the text than its first significant appearance. See index for further details.

• Near the chapter summary in each chapter, you will find a section entitled *Practicing Christian Spirituality*. In these sections I have offered personal exercises or “soul projects” appropriate to each chapter. These exercises require personal application of the material presented. I believe that if a student were to complete each of these exercises, the study would become not an assignment but a retreat, and the text would be not merely illuminating or interesting but transforming.

• At the end of each chapter, you will find a **chapter summary**, **questions for consideration**, and a list of works titled *Looking Further* to help you identify resources for further exploration.
1

Introducing Christian Spirituality

OUTLINE

1. What Is Christian Spirituality?
2. Distinguishing Terms
   a. Mysticism
   b. Spiritual Theology
   c. Sanctification
   d. Religion
   e. Spiritual Formation
3. Forms of Christian Spirituality
   a. The Level of Practice
   b. The Level of Dynamics
   c. The Level of Academic Discipline
4. Trends in Christian Spirituality
   a. Descriptive
   b. Emphasis on Experience
   c. Room for the Corporate
   d. Somewhat Engaged
   e. Interdisciplinary
5. The Foundations of Christian Spirituality
   a. Christian Revelation
   b. The Living God
   c. Human Experience
   d. Relationship with God
   e. A Relationship of Love
6. Christian Spirituality’s Big Issues
   a. How Do We Explore Relationship with God?
   b. Who Are We as Humans?
   c. Who Is God?
   d. What Is Relationship with God?
   e. How Are People Transformed in Christ?
   f. How Are Christians Formed into the Likeness of Christ?
   g. What is Prayer?
   h. What Does It Mean to Care?
   i. How Do We Know What Is from God?
   j. Where Does Real Renewal Come From?

OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will gain a preliminary acquaintance with Christian spirituality. You will get an inspiring feel for the classics of Christian spirituality by reading a sample of Bernard of Clairvaux’s essay on loving God. You will also be introduced to some of the main trends and issues facing the study of Christian spirituality. After reading this chapter you should be able to

- distinguish some of the differences between spirituality and other related terms;
- explain something of the diversity of Christian spirituality as well as something of the unity of Christian spirituality.

Finally, you will spend some time reflecting on what it might mean for you to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.
Let’s begin by listening to a couple of sample expressions of Christian spirituality. Our first expression is taken from William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929.1 In this story, Faulkner paints a picture of life in the southern United States, and, more particularly, in this scene we catch the tail end of an African-American church service in the old South. Let’s join young Ben, little Frony, their mother Dilsey, and the rest of the congregation as they listen to the sermon. What does Christian spirituality look like for the characters of Faulkner’s story?

The preacher fumbled in his coat and took out a handkerchief and mopped his face. A low concerted sound rose from the congregation: “Mmmmmmmmmmmmm!” The woman’s voice said, “Yes, Jesus! Jesus!”

“Breddren! Look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus wus like dat once. He mammy suffered de glory en de pangs. Sometime maybe she helt him at de nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep; maybe she look out de do’ en see de Roman po-lice passin.” He tramped back and forth, mopping his face. “Listen breddren! I sees de day. Ma’y settin in de do’ wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus. Like dem chillen dar, de little Jesus.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm! Jesus! Little Jesus!” and another voice, rising:

“I sees, O Jesus! Oh I sees!” and still another, without words, like bubbles rising in water.

“I sees hit, breddren! I sees hit! I sees Calvary, wid de sacred trees, sees de thief en de murderer en de least of dese; I hears de boasting en de braggin: Ef you be Jesus, lif up yo tree en walk! I hears de wailin of women en de evenin lamentations; Den, lo! Breddren! Yes, breddren! Whut I see? Whut I see, O sinner! I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt Me dat ye shall live again; I died dat dem whut sees en believes shall never die. Breddren, O breddren! I sees de doom crack en hears de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb!”

In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze. Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb.

As they walked through the bright noon, up the sandy road with the dispersing congregation talking easily again group to group, she continued to weep, unmindful of the talk.

“He sho a preacher, mon! He didn’t look like much at first, but hush!”

“He seed de power en de glory.”

“Yes, suh. He seed hit. Face to face he seed hit.”

Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.

“Why’n you quit dat, mammy?” Frony said. “Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon.”

“I’ve seen de first en de last,” Dilsey said.

“Never you mind me.”

“First en last whut?” Frony said.

“Never you mind,” Dilsey said. “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin.”

In our second (also fictional) sample, we listen in to a conversation at a coffee shop after a poetry reading. Where do you see Christian spirituality here?

“You know, I think I’m gettin tired of this scene.”

“Really?” Sarah said. “You’ve got to be kidding. Your reading tonight was fresh. You had them hanging on every word. And that part about the entertainment industry being cyber-puppets in the hands of the system—you really broke it down.”

“Yea, exactly,” Jason chimed in. “And look at this crowd. Kailee, you’ve been here long enough. It’s really starting to happen.”

“Thanks guys, you’re sweet.” Kailee hesitated, taking a sip.

“There’s really something on your mind,” Sarah probed.
“I’m not sure how to talk about it, if I can even put it into words. Funny, me the poet, with no words.”

“Go ahead. Take your time.” Sarah invited, “We’ll wait.”

“You see,” Kailee began after a brief pause, “maybe that’s the whole point. Its just so easy to critique this and deconstruct that. I can find words anywhere and everywhere to show how superficial things are. Nobody’s real and we all know that. And so here we are, the ‘enlightened’ ones proclaiming everybody else’s non-reality. And yet . . .

“And yet,” Jason repeated.

Again Kailee hesitated. “Yesterday I was taking the sub home from school, and you know when you go around the turn in the North tunnel how the wheels screech and the cars shake a little this way and that, and then you come out by that little park?”

Jason and Sarah nodded.

“Well, I came out, and saw the park, and someone had planted a few petunias there. It wasn’t much, but they were so nice. And I thought how there they were, so still and quiet, and so pretty right there just outside all the noise and the commotion.”

“Uh huh,” responded Jason.

“I wanted to stop. To just sit with those petunias, just to be there, with them, you know? But really, as I thought about it, and I imagined myself actually doing it—now don’t think I’m crazy—I was actually kind of afraid.”

“Afraid?” Sarah asked.

“Afraid of petunias?”

“No, not afraid of petunias,” Kailee retorted. “Listen to me . . . Ever since I left home I’ve been making noise. I’ve been shaking people around. I’ve been racing here and there telling the world that it’s all a farce, that there’s no meaning, that the powers have duped us all into a blind and mindless bliss. I question authority, I question God, I question everything . . . And there, just outside there are these petunias, . . . these answers, . . . in absolute stillness. Not the kind of answers we show off in our poetic fashion shows every week here, but real answers. I mean the real thing. This could change everything for me. But I’m not sure I want to go there.”

When we are confronted with “de beginnin and de endin” or when we look beneath our shallow cynicism into a mysterious stillness, whether we hear in a shout or in a whisper, we come face to face with the world of spirituality.

What Is Christian Spirituality?

In the past two decades, there has been a virtual explosion of published literature associated with spirituality. One can readily find discussion of the spirituality of sports, twelve-step spirituality, new age spirituality, as well as the spiritualities of every possible religious movement. Bernard McGinn, in his contribution to the first volume of the Christian Spirituality Bulletin, notes that he turned up some thirty-five different definitions of spirituality. One wonders whether contemporary Western culture hasn’t followed the example of Humpty Dumpty, who, when confronted about his use of language replied, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Associations between the term spirituality and widely different sectors of religious culture have caused some Christians to look with caution at participation in spirituality. Yet, however vague the current use of the word may be, the term spirituality, and the phenomena associated with it, have been around for some time, and are likely to attract attention for some time to come.

The term spirituality was introduced to the West by the use of the Latin spiritualitas...
to translate the Greek adjective pneumatikos (spiritual; from pneuma, “spirit”). In early Greek and Latin Christian writings, spirituality referred to one’s appropriation of the Spirit of Jesus in life and ministry. The term was also used philosophically for that which pertains to the immaterial soul (spirit, as opposed to body). At times these two meanings were linked in an unfortunate rejection of bodily and material existence in favor of the pursuit of the spiritual life. The term was also used more narrowly to refer to the inner states or dispositions of the soul (referring, for example, to an uneasiness of one’s spirit). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, spirituality came to be used synonymously with devotion, piety, and religion. More recently, however, the latter two have gained a negative connotation—consider how we now look with disdain on the empty formalism of one who is pious or religious. Other comparable terms (spiritualité in French, Geistigkeit in German, spirituality in English) carried these various nuances through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. As spirituality was introduced to an increasingly pluralist and secular Western culture, it received still broader meanings: meanings that were increasingly associated with distinctly religious life.

In spite of the variety of nuance, however, the dominant meaning of spiritual or spirituality refers to human interaction with the transcendent or divine. Within the Christian tradition, it refers specifically to relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Thus, at least in a general sense, Christian spirituality says something about the character of an individual’s or a group’s relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Both the cultivation of relationship with God and the experience of that relationship are contained and emphasized within the current use of the term. Nearly all of the literature published on Christian spirituality addresses, to some degree, this general sense of the term.

Scholars have explored a more precise definition of spirituality in a few key articles. Walter Principe distinguishes between three levels of meaning of the term with reference to the Christian tradition. At the practical or existential level spirituality is “life in the Spirit as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and daughters and sons of the Father.” Thus we can speak of spirituality as describing the character of our actual, lived relationship with God through the Spirit of Christ, as describing our practice of relationship with Christ. Second, there is the level of the formulation of a teaching about the lived reality. At this level one might speak of Ignatian or Lutheran spiritualities—referring not to Ignatius’s or Luther’s own lived experience, but rather to the teachings, the examples, and the encouragements that dominated their approaches to the spiritual life and that have become patterns for their followers.

What Is Christian Spirituality?

At the level of practice, Christian spirituality is a lived relationship with God. We actually live out, in practice, a relationship with God. ("My spirituality has been nourished by worship music lately.")

At the level of dynamics, Christian spirituality is the formulation of a teaching. We synthesize a way of understanding the dynamics of how relationship with God works. ("My spirituality, just like Lutheran spirituality, emphasizes the role of faith in God’s finished work on the cross.")

At the level of academic discipline, Christian spirituality is a formal “field” of study. We engage in systematic investigation of the lived relationship or formulated teachings of the Christian church. ("My research in spirituality aimed at exploring the ways in which ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ were used in ancient Christian texts to describe Christian growth.")

The exploration of this level often involves the development of models of understanding the dynamics of relationship with God. Principe’s third level identifies the use of the term to refer to the formal study of the first and second levels. Hence we may speak of the academic field of Christian spirituality, which reflects systematically on lived experience of Christ and the formulations surrounding that experience. Literature on Christian spirituality tends to focus on one or another of these levels, though rarely does the literature address only one of these areas exclusively.⁴

Principe’s threefold categorization of meanings provides a helpful structure within which to approach spirituality. This text will blend aspects of all three. At times (and especially in the first two chapters) we will focus attention on Christian spirituality as an academic field. At times (and especially in chapters 5 through 7) we will explore models of the dynamics of the divine-human relationship—formulations by which we understand the Christian spiritual life in general. At other times (and especially chapters 8 through 11) we will review approaches to the practical cultivation of our lived relationship with God. By integrating these three elements—practical lived experience, wisdom about the dynamics of relationship with God, and intelligent methods of scholarship as students of Christian spirituality—we will be introduced to Christian spirituality in all its dimensions.

One thing that is common to all dimensions of Christian spirituality—practice, dynamics, and study—is ongoing dialogue with the classic spiritual texts of the Christian faith. Indeed, the flowering of interest in spirituality in recent decades has developed predominantly through a recovery of the wisdom of the past. Central to this development has been the republishing of many of the spiritual classics of the Christian faith.⁵ Similarly, a number of popular anthologies of spiritual literature aimed at stimulating devotional practice have been published.⁶ Studies of historical models have explored diverse ways of understanding divine-human dynamics.⁷ Along with these, scholarly investigations of aspects of the history of Christian spirituality⁸ have also contributed to the effort of this generation of Christians to reappropriate the spiritual heritage of the Christian faith.

One of the most delightful ways of diving into Christian spirituality is through the reading of these classics. By ruminating on the writings of these masters of the spiritual life, we allow ourselves to be instructed and inspired in the deep things of relationship with God. One of the best-loved of these classics is the little treatise “On Loving God,” written by Cistercian mystic Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). We have provided a few excerpts from this treatise for your refreshment. As you read, ask yourself, What makes this a classic piece of spiritual literature? How does reading this make me feel—guilty? full of longing? embarrassed? whole? How do I love God? Have I ever thought about the reward I receive in loving God? Spend some time with Bernard of Clairvaux’s “drop of water” illustration. Imagine what it might be like to be dissolved fully into Christ and yet not lose any of your self in the process. Stay just for a moment with your reading after you are finished, and savor what may have been gained.

**Distinguishing Terms**

Having introduced Christian spirituality, we can begin to clarify how the word spirituality is to be distinguished from other related terms. Religious terminology is notoriously ambiguous, and terms like spirituality, mysticism, spiritual formation, and religion are certainly no exception. Needless to say, imprecisely using terms like spirituality and mysticism results in an unavoidable overlap of communication. Some understand mysticism as others might understand spirituality. Some speak of spirituality as others might speak of spiritual theology or spiritual formation, and so on. Therefore it may serve us well to review the history and use of some...
Historical Portrait: Bernard of Clairvaux

Excerpts from Bernard of Clairvaux’s “On Loving God”

First see in what measure God deserves to be loved by us, and how he deserves to be loved without measure. For (to repeat briefly what I have said) “he first loved us” (1 John 4:10). He loved—with such love, and so much so generously—us who are so insignificant and who are what we are. I remember that I said at the beginning that the way to love God was without measure. Now since the love which is directed to God is directed to something immense, something infinite (for God is both immense and infinite)—who, I ask, ought to draw a line to our love or measure it out? God loves, whose greatness knows no bounds (Psalm 114:3), whose wisdom cannot be counted (Psalm 146:5), whose peace passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7), and do we measure out our response? It is clear, I think, how much God ought to be loved, and for what merit in him. For his own merit, I say, but to whom is it really clear how great that is? Who can say? Who can feel it? . . .

Lord, you are good to the soul which seeks you. What are you then to the soul which finds? But this is the most wonderful thing, that no one can seek you who has not already found you. You therefore seek to be found so that you may be sought for, sought so that you may be found. . . .

But since the Scripture says that God made everything for himself (Proverbs 16:4; Revelation 4:11) there will be a time when he will cause everything to conform to its Maker and be in harmony with him. In the meantime, we must make this our desire: that as God himself willed that everything should be for himself, so we, too, will that nothing, not even ourselves, may be or have been except for him, that is according to his will, not ours. The satisfaction of our needs will not bring us happiness, not chance delights, as does the sight of his will being fulfilled in us and in everything which concerns us. This is what we ask every day in prayer when we say, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). O holy and chaste love! O sweet and tender affection! O pure and sinless intention of the will—the more pure and sinless in that there is no mixture of self-will in it, the more sweet and tender in that everything it feels is divine.

To love in this way is to become like God. As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a quantity of wine, taking the wine’s flavor and color; as red-hot iron becomes indistinguishable from the glow of fire and its own original form disappears; as air suffused with the light of the sun seems transformed into the brightness of the light, as if it were light itself rather than merely lit up; so in those who are holy, it is necessary for human affection to dissolve in some ineffable way, and be poured into the will of God.

of these terms as a way of clarifying our definition of Christian spirituality and of introducing a few issues that will appear here and there throughout our encounter with Christian spirituality.

Mysticism: The Conscious Experience of the Presence of God

The term mysticism has roots in the Greek term mystikos, generally meaning secret or hidden. For the early Christians,
what was hidden is now made known through Christ: hidden meanings of Scripture are now revealed, the mysteries of the sacraments are now available to those who participate. The phrase *mystical theology* expresses the character of the Christian’s relationship with Christ and the Spirit in the church. The emphasis in the early, or patristic, period of the church was on the Christian’s participation in the objective work of Christ, and early mystical writings, such as those of Origen (ca. 185–ca. 284), Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395), and Evagrius Ponticus (346–99), maintained this emphasis. The homilies of Pseudo-Macarius (ca. 400) and the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. 500) also contributed significantly to the early Christian mystical consciousness.

During the Middle Ages, mystical interest began to shift toward the subjective experience of those who were united with Christ, and especially toward the experience of that union in the prayers of certain individuals, often referred to as contemplatives or mystics. While many Protestants subjected the notion of mystical union to a thorough reconceptualization, the focus on subjective experience in Roman Catholicism became especially prominent following the influence of the Carmelite mystics, especially Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and John of the Cross (ca. 1505–ca. 1560).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mysticism became a focus of attention not only among theologians and religious devotees, but also among philosophers and students of religion. Likewise, the fields of psychology and comparative religion brought to the exploration of mysticism new questions, new approaches, and a new level of sophistication. Much of this research in mysticism brought with it a fascination with special experiences and states of consciousness.

Currently *mysticism* and *mystic* are used with all of the nuances mentioned above. Historian Bernard McGinn offers a mature summary of Western Christian understanding of mysticism centered around the notion of presence. He writes, “Thus we can say that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”

How then are we to distinguish mysticism from spirituality? Both emphasize the experiential aspect of faith. Both mysticism and spirituality give special attention to the life of the spirit. But whereas mysticism finds its center in the consciousness of God’s presence, spirituality refers to a broader reality—as Principe put it, “life in the Spirit.” Mysticism, unlike spirituality, is focally concerned with the human consciousness of the direct presence of God. Spirituality, on the other hand, is concerned with the entirety of the lived experience of an individual or group in relationship with God. The present work will use *spirituality* as the more encompassing term and will use *mystics* and *mysticism* primarily in reference to the consciousness of God’s immediate presence. We will explore the nature of mysticism in greater detail in chapter 9.

### Figure 1.1

**Spirituality and Mysticism**

- **Spirituality**: the entirety of lived relationship with God
- **Mysticism**: the conscious experience of the divine presence

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of the Roman Catholic Church during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in France. Distinctions between the study of doctrine and the study of ethics, along with the development of a “science” of the spiritual life, though not unknown in the Middle Ages, were aggressively explored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An interest in theological specification combined with an interest in the life of Christian perfection, creating two new theological specializations: ascetical theology, which addressed progress in Christian life in its earlier stages, and mystical theology, which explored the further stages of spiritual maturity.

Pursuit of this new science led to the production of standard manuals of Christian spiritual life, detailing the steps of progress from the onset of the spiritual life to the peak of Christian perfection. (This period or style of Catholic spirituality is sometimes referred to as “manual spirituality.”) Ultimately, in the wake of disputes, new terminology was developed to minimize the distinction between ascetical and mystical stages. The term spiritualité in French was used to speak of the whole of the Christian’s progress in perfection, and in English, spiritual theology became the term used to identify the science of this phenomena as a whole. Thus a recent manual by Jordan Aumann defines spiritual theology as “that part of theology that, proceeding from the truths of divine revelation and the religious experiences of individuals, defines the nature of the supernatural life, formulates the directives for its growth and development, and explains the process by which souls advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its full perfection.”

Other scholars of Christian spirituality distinguish spiritual theology from academic theology (whether dogmatic theology, systematic theology, biblical theology, or the like); and in so doing, they emphasize an approach to theological studies that respects the personal engagement of the theologian.

There are a couple of important similarities between spiritual theology and the discipline of Christian spirituality. First, they both involve the student personally as well as academically. Christian spirituality is a “self-implicating discipline.” Christian spirituality involves not simply exploration of the character of relationship with the divine (a descriptive element), but also an interest in the improvement of that relationship (necessitating a normative element). Furthermore, spiritual theology and spirituality use both theological and experiential data. The development of a separate science of the spiritual life (spiritual theology) originally involved an intentional integration of both theological truths and psychological truths, a tendency that persists in current treatments of spiritual theology. Similarly, current thinking of spirituality as relationship with the divine demands an interdisciplinary synthesis of insights regarding the divine, the human, and the nature of relationship.

How then should we distinguish between spiritual theology and spirituality? First, they differ subtly in subject matter. We have seen clearly that the subject matter of spiritual theology is growth toward perfection. The literature on spiritual theology is often preoccupied with stages and grades of development to perfection: as Charles André Bernard lists, “the degrees of charity, the grades of prayer, the degrees of humility.” Some, however, find an exclusive interest in growth toward perfection to be insufficient. Scholars of Christian spirituality suggest that the subject matter to be explored is, rather, the entirety

Well, I haven’t actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once!
of the divine human relationship itself. As Philip Sheldrake writes of spirituality as it developed from spiritual theology, “it does not so much concern itself with defining perfection as with surveying the complex mystery of human growth in the context of a living relationship with the Absolute.”

Second, spiritual theology and the discipline of Christian spirituality differ in their understanding of the relationship between the theological disciplines. Spiritual theology frequently assumes a hierarchical approach to the theological disciplines: dogmatic theology teaches us what to believe, ethical theology instructs us concerning how to act according to the demands of strict obligation, and ascetical or mystical theology (spiritual theology) shows us how we might progress beyond the requirements of obligation to the heights of spiritual perfection. Just as ethical theology possesses a subordinate relationship to dogmatic theology, so ascetical and mystical theology are subordinate to ethical and dogmatic theology. For many scholars of Christian spirituality, however, the shift to spirituality involves a breaking from this hierarchical relationship of doctrine and life. Many found that the manuals of spiritual theology presumed an exclusivity of thought and practice that was not conducive to fruitful dialogue among Christians of various groups or to a renewed appropriation of biblical theology and other related disciplines.

Finally, spiritual theology and the discipline of Christian spirituality differ in their perspective of the field. Spiritual theology emphasizes the individual: the growth to perfection of the individual believer. The field of Christian spirituality, however, is interested in drawing attention to the broader concerns and connections involved in the Christian’s relationship with the Creator of the earth and the people on the earth. Christian spirituality is concerned with all human relationships, it is argued. In the field of spirituality, one makes an effort to integrate the personal, spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions into a single cohesive approach to relationship with God.

This book is a text in Christian spirituality, not spiritual theology. The aim of this text, therefore, is to explore relationship with God with a broad subject matter, a broad range of methods, and a broad perspective. Nonetheless, we will address spiritual growth toward Christlikeness in a variety of ways, especially in chapters 7 and 8.

Sanctification: The Doctrine Concerning God’s Action in Bringing Christians into Holiness

We also must distinguish between the consideration of spirituality and that of sanctification. The term sanctification derives from the Latin sanctus (holy) and was also used to translate the biblical Greek hagiazo, “to make holy.” The term was eventually identified with the theological consideration of the work of God by which Christians grow in holiness—thus we speak of the doctrine of sanctification or sanctifying grace. (In the Eastern Church one considers also the doctrine of deification.) For example, the Reformed tradition’s Westminster Shorter Catechism, originally written in 1646, defines sanctification (in question 35) as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.” In the seventeenth century, the notion of sanctification was theologically important especially in placement alongside the notion of justification, which referred to the work of God in bringing people into the family of Christians.

Spirituality, as we have learned, addresses more than the growth of the believer, though that is certainly an important element. The scope of spirituality is the entirety of the lived and experienced relationship with God, as mentioned above. Thus the purview of humiliation, justification, regeneration, sanctification, glorification, and more are all potentially within the
scope of spirituality. Insofar as sanctification is viewed as a segment of the whole of the divine-human relationship, it must be seen as a subcategory of spirituality.

Though never entirely separated, the study of sanctification and the study of spirituality may also be distinguished by method. Within reflection on sanctification, primary attention is paid to the normative dimension, the clarification of how relationship with God ought to be understood and pursued within the context of the faith. Scripture, church tradition, and theological reasoning have played the leading roles in the development of an understanding of sanctification. When discussing spirituality, however, greater (though not exclusive) attention is paid to the experiential dimension. What is foremost to a student of Christian spirituality is the believer’s real, actual, existential, experienced relationship with God (how relationship with God is actually understood and lived). Thus, while students of sanctification might spend much of their time reading the sermons of John Wesley (1703–91), founder of the Methodist movement, students of spirituality might be found reading the journals of John Wesley. Christian spirituality ultimately mediates between the descriptive and the normative. Christian spirituality, as lived relationship with God, simply is and therefore deserves to be described honestly from a phenomenological perspective. Yet as authentic Christian spirituality, it cannot be entirely removed from the desire for the cultivation of or improvement of relationship with God within the context of a tradition of faith. Therefore it will draw from and feed into discussion of the normative. As a text addressing Christian spirituality, this book will not merely present the doctrine of God’s work in bringing Christians into holiness; rather, it will cover the whole of relationship with God. We will address the issues of Christian spirituality bearing on the doctrine of sanctification more closely in chapters 7 and 8.

By now you may be wondering, as the portrait of spirituality gets broader and broader, whether the term might not eventually engulf the whole of religion itself. Indeed, as one looks at the flood of publications, seminars, retreats, organizations, centers, programs, and whatnot that identify themselves in some form with the word spirituality, one begins to wonder.

Let us take as our point of reference an approach to defining religion that is used by many scholars in the study of religion: Ninian Smart’s six-dimensional analysis of religion.21 Smart suggests that we look at religion and religions in terms of a family resemblance among sacred narrative (or myth), doctrine, ritual, institution, experience, and ethics. How might we find spirituality in this model? On the one hand, it might appear that spirituality would simply fit into the “experience” segment of religion: whereas dogmatic theology addresses the doctrine of the Christian religion, spirituality addresses Christian experiences. Yet it is not as simple as that. The subject matter of spirituality is not the experiences of the faith, but the lived, experienced relationship as such—as a whole. Doctrine may not be the focus of spirituality, yet insofar as our view of God affects our actual relationship with God, doctrine begins to enter into the field of spirituality. Likewise, the structures and patterns of ritual are not spirituality, yet the way ritual fosters or hinders actual experienced relationship with God does bear on spirituality. Thus spirituality may indeed touch on each of the dimensions of religion, yet it does so only insofar as it is centrally involved in a person’s or group’s actual lived relationship with God.

Nevertheless, although there may be overlap between religious studies and spirituality in terms of content, there is an important difference in terms of scholarly method. The study of religion—at least as
many promote the field of religious studies—differs significantly from spirituality in terms of the position of the scholar or student. There is, among many in religious studies, an effort to limit the attention of the field to “neutral” descriptions of religious phenomena. In order to prevent the degeneration of religious studies to cheap proselytism, it is argued that the scholar must be (or at least must present the appearance of being) personally disengaged from the material being studied. Christian spirituality, however, does not pretend to approach, nor does it desire, such neutrality. As mentioned above, spirituality is a self-implicating discipline, involving not only careful study of the subject matter, but a real desire to cultivate relationship with God through Christ. In this sense Christian spirituality involves a methodology for insiders, an approach to lived relationship with God that is concerned not simply with phenomenal description but also with improvement—an approach that mediates not simply the descriptive but also the normative.

**Spiritual Formation: Exploring the Means by Which Believers Are Fostered toward Growth in Christ**

Emphasis on the improvement of relationship, on the normative (and formative), brings us to the final term being considered: *spiritual formation*. The roots of spiritual formation lie in the history of the training of priests and religious, especially within the Roman Catholic church. One finds spiritual formation mentioned in such places as the documents of Vatican II that address the formation of priests and the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus that address the development of young Jesuits. Interest in spiritual formation spread from Roman Catholic training to Protestant circles in the past few decades. Protestant psychiatrist and scholar of Christian spirituality Gerald May distinguishes between spiritual formation, spiritual guidance, and spiritual direction as follows:

**Spiritual formation** is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth processes of spiritual direction.

**Spiritual guidance** can apply to any situation in which people receive help, assistance, attention, or facilitation in the process of their spiritual formation. This applies not only to deepening one’s personal realization of relationship to God, but also to the dynamic living-out of that realization in the actions of daily life. Spiritual guidance can come through almost any conceivable channel. Certainly it can occur in church or other religious community settings, but it can also come from friends, family, coworkers, scripture, nature, art, and a multitude of other sources.

When spiritual guidance occurs in a formal one-to-one relationship with another individual, it can be called *spiritual direction*.

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May’s distinctions point to an important feature of spiritual formation: while spiritual theology and the doctrine of sanctification approach growth in maturity from the reflective side—the side of “science”—spiritual formation approaches the same topic from the practical side, exploring the relationships and means by which believers are fostered toward growth in Christ.

This brings us to the point of asking about the distinctions between spiritual formation and spirituality. Once again, while there are similarities between these two ideas—for example, both have ties to the practical and both attend to personal growth in Christ—spirituality appears to be the broader idea, embracing spiritual formation as a vital part of its horizon. In the present text, therefore, we will survey the broader question of relationship with God in general, and will explore the specifics of spiritual formation in a separate chapter (chapter 8).

**Forms of Christian Spirituality**

We encounter Christian spirituality at three levels: the level of practice, which refers to our actual cultivation and experience of relationship with God; the level of dynamics, which refers to our formulation of the patterns of lived divine-human relationship; and the level of academic discipline, which refers to the formal field of study that explores the first two levels in a systematic manner. As we all know, people differ in a variety of ways. Because people differ, spiritualities differ. Thus we can expect to find a diversity of approaches to spiritual practice, a diversity of formulations or models of the dynamics of divine-human relationship, and a diversity of schools of thought related to the methods and content of the academic discipline of Christian spirituality. Thus we can speak of a variety of types, or forms, of Christian spirituality. Indeed, at times it seems wiser to speak not of Christian spiritualities, but rather of Christian spiritualities. These differences can be illustrated by a few examples, though you will gain a fuller understanding of this as you explore each of the chapters of this book.

**The Level of Practice**

At the level of practice, it is easy to comprehend that different individuals and groups tend to approach and experience God differently. Theologian Alister McGrath, for example, presents a range of variables that give rise to different types of spirituality. Some differences are due to differences in personality—for instance, one person may be more or less emotional than another. Thus we can speak of affective spiritualities (those that focus on our felt sense of God’s presence) or speculative spiritualities (those that reflect on the great truths of the Christian faith). Some differences are a result of one’s geographic location. Thus Celtic spirituality expresses a different character than Rhineland mysticism. Some differences are due to our location in time. Thus late-medieval spirituality is somewhat different from the patristic spirituality of the first five or so centuries of Christian history. Each of these differences, and each type of differences, highlights some aspects of our relationship with God and minimizes others. For this reason there are inherent strengths and weaknesses of each type of spirituality.

**The Level of Dynamics**

At the level of dynamics, the level of formulating a “teaching about” relationship with God or an “approach to” relationship with God, we can see again that differences will affect the models of relationship with God we develop and enact. Dutch scholar Kees Waaijman identifies three basic forms of spirituality—lay spirituality, schools of spirituality, and countermovements—the latter two of which identify groups that have formulated established teachings about the dynamics of relationship with God. Some differences in our understanding of the dynamics of relationship with God are attributable to our religious traditions (and subtraditions). Thus we can speak of
Orthodox, Jesuit, or Lutheran spiritualities. Some may see relationship with God as a journey (as in Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Moses), others as a marriage (as in Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons on the Song of Songs). Some approaches will be rooted in Catholic Scholasticism (such as John of the Cross’s Ascent of Mount Carmel), and others will be rooted in Protestant Calvinism (such as Lewis Bayly’s The Practice of Piety). Some formulations of spiritual experience might reflect debates concerning the role of prayer in the Christian life (as does Hesychast spirituality) or issues surrounding sixteenth century Spanish Catholicism (as does Ignatian spirituality), while others might originate from issues addressing twentieth-century ecumenical questions (as does the spirituality of Taizé). More recently, Geoffrey Wainwright and others have used attitudes of the church toward culture to outline some of the differences between spiritualities.

The Level of Academic Discipline

Christian spirituality also exhibits diversity at the level of academic discipline. This diversity can be seen first of all with regard to the subject matter under consideration. For example, since relationship with God involves both beginners and those who are more mature, the standard historical divisions between ascetical and mystical theology become relevant. Scholars of spirituality also exhibit diversity with regard to their method of approach to the subject matter. Some view relationship with God more descriptively (thus giving rise to historical, psychological, and phenomenological analyses of spirituality), others more normatively (thus giving rise to theological, philosophical, and application-oriented approaches to spirituality). Michael Downey divides methodological approaches to studying Christian spirituality into four primary groups: the theological method, the historical method, the anthropological method, and the appropriative method. Those who write and teach about Christian spirituality also differ with regard to a sense of openness to the variety of understandings, practices, and experiences associated with Christian spirituality. Bruce Demarest recognizes these differences as he divides the “leading voices” in Christian spirituality into three camps: progressives (those most open to input from a variety of fields and viewpoints), moderates, and conservatives (those least open).}

Christian spirituality comes in a variety of forms. We experience God as unique individuals and communities. We collect together in groups with common understandings of the dynamics of relationship with God. We investigate that relationship with different methods and perspectives. Try this exercise. Think of your own personality, your background, your community, your style of study. What form of spirituality do you have?
Trends in Christian Spirituality

In each century, believers explore relationship with God in the context of their own perspectives, interests, and concerns. Contemporary scholars and practitioners of Christian spirituality are no exception to this rule. Indeed, as we sought to distinguish spirituality from other similar terms, a few features characteristic of current approaches to Christian spirituality were introduced. Highlighting a few trends characteristic of the academic study of Christian spirituality (which in turn reflects broader trends in lived spirituality), and noting a few of the possibilities and dangers along the way, will give us a still clearer picture of Christian spirituality.

Descriptive

First, people today are inclined to approach relationship with God more from a descriptive or experiential approach and less from a prescriptive or normative approach. People today are interested in what people actually think, experience, or do, not merely in what their church or scriptures say relationship with God is or ought to be like. The current study of Christian spirituality has a tendency to emphasize the particular case as opposed to the universal principle. The strength of this trend has been to facilitate an appreciation for the diversity of Christian life. The danger is that we can lose sight of the forest for the trees. We may forget the normative in the midst of interest in the descriptive. The present text will blend the descriptive with the prescriptive by paying special attention to the dynamics of relationship with God: patterns of relating that are outlined in the norms of scripture and tradition but that are more thoroughly developed by a descriptive exploration.

Emphasis on Experience

The second trend in spirituality, related to the first, is an emphasis on experience. If there is one feature on which scholars of the academic field of Christian spirituality universally agree, it may be the idea that Christian spirituality addresses experience. This emphasis on and discussion of experience has opened up new pathways and perspectives for understanding relationship with God. Experience, however, is a notoriously vague term, at times bringing confusion rather than clarity. The present text will address the nature of experience with as much precision as a textbook allows. In chapters 3 and 5 we will explore a specific model of human experience rooted in theology, philosophy, and the human sciences. This model will then serve as a framework within which the rest of the material in the book will be comprehended. By paying careful attention to the model of divine and human experience presented in these early chapters, you will discover a sense of the whole within which all the details of conversion, prayer, spiritual formation, and so on can be more easily recognized and comprehended.

Room for the Corporate

Third, the field of Christian spirituality has increasingly made room for the corporate. The spiritual manuals of a century ago considered relationship with God almost exclusively in terms of the interior life of an individual believer. This is not the case now. Today students of spirituality also study the spiritual life of local communities. Scholars are careful to understand spiritual life within the context of larger traditional and corporate structures, the body of Christ as lived and living. People think of the aims of spiritual maturity not only in terms of the intimacy of personal devotion, but also in terms of expressions of worship and love in congregational and political life. The field of spirituality is beginning to consider community as a means of mediating relationship with God. One student asks, “Although I still value the depth and quality of the traditional (one-on-one) approach to spiritual direction, I am increasingly
considering this question: how do faithful communities become spiritual companions or directors for one another in the twenty-first century?" While an earlier generation may have focused on private spiritual disciplines, contemporary students increasingly desire to explore the role of public life in the divine-human relationship. Many aspects of Christian spirituality are being explored from a corporate perspective. This new focus on the communal is restoring a much-neglected aspect of gospel spirituality. Nonetheless, one faces the danger of community replacing authentic relationship with God. The present text will include both individual and corporate dimensions of Christian spirituality throughout the book, paying special attention to the life of care in chapter 10.

Somewhat Engaged

Fourth, the contemporary exploration of spirituality is perhaps best understood as a "somewhat engaged" field of study. It is not as detached as religious studies, yet it is not as narrowly practical as the subdiscipline of spiritual formation. There is permission, if not encouragement, to be moved, affected, even transformed by one's studies and to let that transformation influence the process and conclusions of the study itself. Scholars in Christian spirituality do want to help people grow in authentic relationship with God, yet they take great care not to let the field of spirituality degenerate to a shallow devotionalism. Our aim is not simply the cultivation of popular devotion; it is the well-researched reflection on the nature of relationship with God. And for this reason there is a serious academic side to the field of spirituality. The present text will respect this tension between the theoretical and practical. It begins with the theoretical, setting the notion of relationship with God within a carefully considered understanding of each of the parties. Nevertheless, it will offer more practical wisdom and especially as we progress through the text. It will treat at length some of the nuances of relationship with God that are of special value to pastors and spiritual caregivers. It will, on occasion, offer suggestions for spiritual growth. This practical wisdom will, however, be set within a survey of the studied reflections of scholars of Christian spirituality.

Interdisciplinary

Finally, the trend in Christian spirituality appears to be a move toward greater interdisciplinarity. One need only review the articles in Spirituality Today, Christian Spirituality Bulletin (now Spiritus), and other related journals to see this trend. As scholars explore both the divine and human dimensions of Christian spirituality, as they pursue an understanding of what relationship with God is all about, they seek dialogue partners in the arts and sciences alike. The strength of this approach is, again, its value in opening up new ways of looking at the divine-human relationship. The danger, however (especially as the field of Christian spirituality is a young discipline), is that fascination with novelty
may either lure us from our moorings in the Christian tradition or make the field so diffuse that there is little to hold it together. The present text will draw from a variety of disciplines—especially biblical studies, philosophy, theology, history, and the human sciences. We will examine the interdisciplinary approach to Christian spirituality in greater detail in chapter 2.

The Foundations of Christian Spirituality

While the forms and trends in Christian spirituality point us to the diversity of relationship with God, we must, at the same time, attend to the unity of Christian spirituality. Because each individual is human and each group comprises humans, and because God is the same God in every relationship, there will be a certain sameness in the character of relationship with God throughout Christian history. Thus we can speak of a fundamental pattern or "foundations" characterizing Christian relationship with God in general, foundations that support our practice, our understanding of the dynamics of the divine-human relationship, and our formal study of Christian spirituality. The foundations of Christian spirituality arise primarily from "questions posed specifically by the Christian tradition of revelation about the nature of God, human nature and the relationship between the two." Yet they also arise as we reflect on certain patterns of human existence as specifically human as well as from scientific and philosophical reflections on the nature of relationship itself and from the situations and questions of life in general. These foundations clarify the definition not simply of Christian spirituality, but also of the nature of an authentic Christian spirituality.

Christian Revelation

The primary foundation of Christian spirituality is the revelation of God—in Jesus Christ, in the scriptures, and in the Spirit through the church. Christian spirituality is grounded in Christian revelation. While we respect the mystery of God, aware that all our theologizing are meager attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible, we must affirm at the same time that authentic Christian relationship with God grows in dialogue with the fundamental texts and truths of the Christian faith. Therefore, approach to relationship with God must be rooted in the revelation of God through Christ and the scriptures, as interpreted through the historic body of Christ. The sacred character of Christian revelation will be assumed in this text.

The Living God

The second foundational principle of authentic Christian spirituality is the reality of the spiritual world. Spirituality implies Spirit. If Christian spirituality addresses the actual lived relationship between people and God, then the actual living reality of God must be understood from the start. It may be possible to present a religious studies approach to Christian spirituality in which one precends from presuppositions regarding the reality or character of the divine and chooses rather to explore Christian spirituality by speaking strictly of the human's response to a "perceived transcendent." In the present text (which is a text for "insiders"), we will simply assume the being and activity of the Christian God. Thus we will speak not simply of how the human perceives and relates to the divine, but also of how God relates to us. In so doing we are not exercising sectarian presumption; rather, we are summarizing the wisdom of revealed scriptures, the wise observations of two millennia of Christian history, and our own experience of Spirit. How we understand God affects how we cultivate relationship with God and, frequently, our very experience of the relationship with God.

Human Experience

But just as spirituality is about Spirit, it is also about the human relationship with Spirit. Therefore, in order to comprehend Chris-
tian spirituality, not only must we address the dynamics of the Spirit’s work, but we must also explore the nature and dynamics of human experience. We must speak of the ways of God with people, but we must also speak of the ways of people with God. Hence, our third foundational principle of Christian spirituality is that human experience, in all its richness, is related to God. Christian spirituality sees God in relationship with humans—heart, mind, soul, and strength—and it acknowledges the full multidimensionality of human experience. Thus our approach to relationship with God must account for our active and contemplative sides. Thus we must consider the ways in which all our faculties and operations (imagination, perception, emotions, intellect, volition, and so on) serve to help or hinder relationship with God. Thus we must comprehend spirituality in the context of all our relationships as humans: with ourselves, with God, with others, and with the ecosphere.

**Relationship with God**

Next, we move from reflecting on each of the participants to reflecting on the dynamics of the divine-human relationship itself. Christians believe not only in the existence of the divine and the human, but also in the fact of their joining. A real God and real human without real connection (as in, perhaps, an extreme deist position) offers no foundation for spirituality. Christian spirituality assumes the mutual self-communication of two parties (divine and human), where one reveals and shares something of one’s experience to the other and with the other. This is our fourth principle of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality expresses the transformation of one by means of another. Social psychological terms such as approach, symbolic interaction, and entrustment, then, all have their place in the understanding of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality involves the sharing of selves. Thus, as an exploration of the fullness of God (insofar as this can be known or experienced) encountering the fullness of human experience, authentic Christian spirituality must attempt to embrace the whole of the gospel. (Shall we call it the “full gospel”?) It aims at being Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and love-expressive. It will seek to reconcile faith and works, evangelism and social action, attending to all those arenas of life where God and human share life together.

**A Relationship of Love**

The final foundational principle of the basic framework of Christian spirituality is this: the fundamental character of the relationship between the divine and human is love. Love is at the center of God’s own Trinitarian life. The movement of God toward humanity is a movement of love, a love to the death. The greatest commandments concern our love for God and for one another. Thus, for example, an authentic approach to Christian spirituality begins from a place of rest in the loving acceptance God gives us through Christ. Likewise, authentic Christian spirituality, as a spirituality of love, will not be neutral. Jesus exercised his relationship with God from a stance of active, compassionate identification with those in need around him. If Christian spirituality has anything to do with becoming like Christ, it must seek to operate from this same identification. Though the practices and politics of spirituality may vary, authentic spirituality will not be able to avoid involvement with suffering and need. Christian spirituality embraces the virtues of Christ: justice, chastity, patience, contentment, mercy, and especially love.

Christian spirituality, as the actual relationship of a person or group with God through Jesus Christ—either existentially cultivated and experienced, formulated into a model for understanding and practice, or explored systematically within the academic community—exhibits not only a wide diversity of types but also a unity of foundational principles. The framework of our understanding of relationship with
God in Christ is founded on Christian revelation, the character of God, of the human, and of the nature of their relationship. It is the task of Christian spirituality as an academic discipline, and of the present text, to illumine this blend of unity and diversity in holy love.

### Christian Spirituality’s Big Issues

Any field of study has its own set of big issues—questions or topics that shape the character of that field and that often organize the contents of introductory textbooks in the field. Psychology textbooks address personality, development, perception, cognition, and so on. Textbooks in philosophy discuss knowledge, cosmology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, and the like. It is the same in Christian spirituality. The big issues that have been raised over the centuries with regard to our relationship with God will form the major divisions of this book, again gradually progressing from the more theoretical to the more practical.

#### How Do We Explore Relationship with God?

The first issue to be discussed is the issue of methodology. Just how are we to ask questions about the relationship between humans and God? What do scholars of Christian spirituality do when they explore the divine-human relationship? How can the mysteries of the divine-human relationship be explored such that we remain faithful to both our Christian heritage and the actual lived experience of Christians, past and present? We have already seen that there are a variety of scholarly methodologies of approaching reflection on our relationship with God. We will survey the questions regarding the relationship between Christian spirituality and a variety of disciplines relevant to its study in chapter 2.

#### Who Are We as Humans?

Having addressed the question of methodology, we will be ready to explore the nature of the persons or parties that form the relationship of Christian spirituality. In chapter 3 we will explore the nature of human experience: What does it mean to be human? What is it about us that makes it possible for us to relate to God? How do we experience or express relationship with God? Chapter 3 will present the more philosophical model of human experience, describing something of the operations, processes, and relationships involved in human experience.

#### Who Is God?

In chapter 4 we will shift attention from the human to the divine. In what sense is God knowable or unknowable? What is it about God that makes relationship with God possible? What is God like? How does God communicate with humans? How does God express or experience relationship? How do people develop an understanding of who God is for them? These may seem like sophisticated theological questions, yet the nuts and bolts of our spiritual formation are frequently attached, either consciously or unconsciously, to just such questions.

Nevertheless, human experience cannot be really understood apart from its place in the plan of God, especially with reference to Christ. What is humanity about in the...
A Few Questions of Christian Spirituality

- What do scholars of Christian spirituality do when they explore the divine-human relationship?
- What is it about humans that makes it possible for us to relate to God?
- How does God communicate with humans?
- How does God experience relationship?
- How does relationship with God fit into God’s plan for the universe?
- How is a relationship with God similar or different from a relationship with other humans?
- How does relationship with God affect us?
- How are Christians conformed into the likeness of Christ?
- What does it mean to “speak” or to “listen” to God in prayer?
- How does relationship with God affect family, ecology, evangelism, politics, or other forms of care?
- How can we “know God’s will” for us in the particulars of life?
- What facilitates (or kills) “revival”?

What is Relationship with God?

By the time we reach chapter 6 we will really begin to examine relationship with God. Given what we know of human experience and our restoration in Christ, what might relationship with God look like? How does what we know of human relationships help us understand relationship with God? What do we see when we look at the experienced relationship of a believer to Christ? We will first survey the wide range of diversity in lived experience of God. Then we will look more closely at some fundamental dynamics underneath that diversity.

How Are People Transformed in Christ?

Chapter 7, then, takes the outline of relationship with God presented above and develops it into an exploration of transformation. How does relationship with God affect us? What kinds of change happen through relationship with God? How long does transformation take? Are some changes better than others? We will consider Christian transformation as the Godward reorientation of human experience. We observe the work of God and humans in Christian transformation; then we explore the length, breadth, and depth of transformation.

How Are Christians Formed into the Likeness of Christ?

By this time we will have grasped a few of the basic dynamics of Christian relationship with God, and we will be ready to address some of the more practical topics related to Christian spirituality. Chapter 8 addresses the fundamental question of spiritual formation: How is it that Christians are conformed increasingly into the likeness of Christ? Who is involved? What kinds of disciplines are appropriate? Should Christians be ascetics? And what is all this formation for? We will first look at a few biblical principles that shape our understanding of spiritual formation. Then we will explore the contexts, agents, aims, tasks, and means of spiritual formation. Our aim in this chapter is to survey the factors involved in an intentional pursuit of relationship with God, such that sense...
Pursuing Spirituality: A Dangerous Practice?

The pursuit of Christian spirituality might seem at first to be a perfectly safe, if not a positively sanctified, enterprise. What harm could come from cultivating one's relationship with God? What danger could there be in the disciplined exploration of our relationship with God?

Much harm, indeed, some have said. While some Christians are practicing spiritual disciplines, attending retreat centers, joining spiritual direction workshops, and pursuing advanced degrees in spirituality, others are concerned that such pursuits place believers into unwitting cooperation with diabolic strategies, non-Christian worldviews, and practices that do not reflect the authentic Christian faith. They are concerned that, through involvement in the practices and people associated with Christian spirituality, Christians are being seduced into an apostasy of eschatological proportions. Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, for example, critique current interest in spirituality, stating, “It is our conviction, based upon years of research and mountains of evidence, that the secular world is in the late stages of succumbing to the very deception that Jesus and the apostles predicted would immediately precede the Second Coming. We are gravely concerned that millions of Christians are falling victim to the same delusion.”30 Some, like Hunt and McMahon, label this current interest in Christian spirituality as a New Age seduction. Others warn of Christianity’s decay into gnosticism, an approach to the divine-human relationship that denies fundamental Christian beliefs. But the root of their concern with relationship to spirituality is the same. Some are persuaded that the pursuit of spirituality as practiced today often promotes an approach to relationship with God that distorts the Christian faith. For this reason, they argue, the leaders, the institutions, the literature, and the influences associated with Christian spirituality ought to be avoided.

This concern deserves careful attention. I have personally known Christians who abandoned their faith, and whose lives were shipwrecked, in the context of exploring spirituality. Nonetheless, the fact that I write an introduction to Christian spirituality should indicate that I believe avoidance is not the best response. How are we to chart the course of our relationship with God in contemporary life so that Christ, and not culture, is primary? At what point does authentic Christian faith become compromised? When does sincere pursuit of God become an illicit dabbling in the demonic? The New Testament epistles are full of warnings and rebukes regarding these matters. The epistle of 1 Timothy, for example, warns that “some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). Our beliefs, our actions, and our associations may all contribute to the character of our relationship with God. For this reason, an introduction to Christian spirituality must be attentive to the boundary lines of authentic Christian spirituality as difficult as they may be to identify at times.

The issue of the boundary lines of authentic Christian spirituality is well acknowledged by students of Christian spirituality, both ancient and contemporary.31 Desert elders (“fathers” and “mothers” from around the fourth century who sought to pursue devoted relationship with God in the deserts of the Middle East), Puritan divines (who articulated the dynamics of the divine-human relationship in the English-speaking world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and contemporary sages all present...
Introducing Christian Spirituality
guidelines, characteristics, and criteria in hopes of giving a general indication of the boundary lines of authentic Christian spirituality. My suspicion is that we are best served, in this regard, by following a simple thesis: the pursuit of Christian spirituality remains authentically Christian to the degree that it consciously embodies the foundational principles of Christian spirituality. Likewise, spirituality distorts the Christian faith as it is no longer upheld by this foundation. Let us explore this thesis further.

Is the pursuit of Christian spirituality a dangerous practice? Well, it all depends. Are we reaching into the revealed texts and traditions of historic Christianity? Is our exploration of the dynamics of the divine-human relationship founded on the fundamental truths of the Christian faith? If so, then Christian spirituality is not only safe, but saving. When we release our moorings from the sacred texts and traditions, or when we fail to pursue increase in knowledge and love because we are so tightly tied to these moorings, Christian spirituality begins to flounder. Do we acknowledge the personal God of Christianity? When we consider spirituality simply as a human enterprise, or when we misrepresent God as a mere force or as a deity that contains no mystery, our spirituality enters into the danger zone. Are we seeking to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength? Are we recognizing the fullness of human experience as we relate to God?

To the degree that a form of spirituality isolates itself in fascination with one dimension of life (for example, in felt experiences of the Spirit), our approach to relationship with God has lost authenticity and has become a dangerous affair. What about our assumption of the richness of the divine-human relationship? Are we embracing the "full gospel"? Do we acknowledge the range of contributions to our understanding of this full gospel from a variety of Christian traditions? Are we living in a relationship of love with God and others? Is our interest in devotion an escape from relationships or a way into relationships? Are we doing, as well as believing, the truth? Let us be watchful, lest Christian spirituality become a dangerous practice.

Here are some additional questions to ponder: It is one thing to evaluate the danger of pursuing Christian spirituality, but what about the danger of not pursuing Christian spirituality? Should we be concerned if our pursuit of relationship with God is not dangerous? Could Christ's call to follow perhaps be a call into the danger zones?

can be made of the variety of practices and approaches to spiritual disciplines.

What Is Prayer?

One cannot speak of Christian spirituality without, sooner or later, speaking of prayer. We will survey reflection on prayer in chapter 9. My aim is not to create a guidebook to personal prayer; rather we will explore the dynamics of prayer in light of a variety of different perspectives and in the context of our model of human experience. How are mind and emotions involved in prayer? What particular means have been used to facilitate corporate or personal communication with God? What is it like to "listen" to God how do the ordinary dynamics of relationship affect the life of prayer? What happens when we pray? What happens when God "answers" prayer? What kinds of effects might prayer have on those who pray, or on the world?

What Does It Mean to Care?

In chapter 10, we shift our attention from the life of prayer to the life of care.

Christian spirituality is not just about our relationship with God as individuals. It is fostered and expressed in relationship with others. Yet while there has been much systematic reflection on the life of prayer, there has been little of this with regard to the life of care. For this reason chapter 10 will be somewhat exploratory. What is Christian care all about? Who are the “others” for whom we care? What do we give them when we care? From what contexts do we offer care? What kinds of issues will we have to face when we offer care? Are there particular ways of offering care, like there are ways of prayer? These are the kinds of questions to be explored as we look into the life of care.

How Do We Know What Is from God?

We treat the topic of discernment in chapter 11. Christian discernment deals with issues involved in the question, How do I know what is or is not from God? Questions regarding the discernment of God’s presence or God’s will arise when we explore our vocation, when we act as a community, when we evaluate our experience, or when we assess the trends of our times. What kinds of virtues best make us ready to recognize the presence and will of God? How do communities get ready to meet together to decide direction for the group? How can we tell whether a “move of God” is really from God or not? This chapter will present the process and dynamics involved in getting to the place where we can say with confidence, “This is God.”

Where Does Real Renewal Come From?

Our final chapter, chapter 12, will draw things together around the theme of renewal. Renewal, revival, revitalization, reform, and the like have been at the heart of Christian spirituality since ancient times, and they are also relevant today. Once again, using the model of Christian spirituality developed in the previous chapters, we will consider just how Christian renewal might be comprehended. We will look at the dynamics of development and decay of renewal. We will explore the cultivation and correction of revival. We will explore the renewal of our selves, of our communities, and of our world.

“This is my fourth sermon on the transforming power of the gospel. Why do you look like the same old bunch?”
## Introducing Christian Spirituality

An Exercise in Loving God with Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

The first great commandment is that we would “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). While it would be wrong to be too exacting about just what each of these terms means here, it is clear that the passage encourages us toward a spirituality of wholehearted devotion to God. The present exercise is a way of enabling and inspiring us to dream of what that kind of devotion might look like.

First, find your sacred place and time, a place and time to be with God. They should be free of distractions. Remember, Christ himself is with us in the Spirit. Settle down and set your mind on the things of God. This may take some time. That’s OK.

Now, let’s begin with the heart. Think about your heart for a moment. When you think about your heart, or the Bible’s understanding of heart, what do you think of? Think of any key “heart” moments in your life. What were they like? Have you loved anyone with your heart? What was that like? What might it be like to love the Lord with your heart? With all your heart? How would you feel if you loved the Lord with all your heart? How might life be different for you than it is now?

Then the mind. First spend a little time just thinking about the mind, about what it means to have a mind. Again, review your history: Have you ever had any significant “mind” moments in your past? Have you ever thought about loving someone with your mind? What might it mean to love God with your mind? With all your mind? What might you be thinking if you loved God with all your mind?

Finally turn your thoughts to strength. Take your time. What, in this passage, might be meant by strength? Where is your own strength? Has your own strength ever been of importance to you? What does it mean to love someone with strength? What might it mean to love the Lord your God with strength? What would you be doing if you loved God with all your strength?

When you have finished, bring each of the elements together in a wholehearted expression of devotion to God. Offer your love to God. Offer him wholehearted love—with all your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength, to the best of your ability. Perhaps you would like to symbolize this offering with a song, a liturgical prayer, a posture of devotion. Allow God the Spirit to respond to you. Perhaps you might like to jot a few notes down from your time with God for future reference.

Lord God, we desire to pursue relationship with you. We cannot pretend spirituality, but we simply come honestly before you. Take our hearts, our souls, our minds, our strength, and enable us to love you more and more. In Jesus’s name. Amen.

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. Christian spirituality refers to relationship with God as lived in practice, as people formulate an understanding about the dynamics of lived relationship with God, and as a formal discipline of academic study that investigates that relationship.

2. Christian spirituality is distinct from mysticism in that mysticism addresses special experiences of the presence of God, whereas spirituality addresses the entirety of the relationship. Spirituality is distinct from spiritual theology in that spiritual theology tends to focus on the individual's growth toward perfection. It differs from sanctification in that it is not the investigation of a doctrine, but of a lived relationship. Spirituality differs from religious studies in that it does not attempt a scholarly neutrality; spirituality is somewhat engaged. Finally, Christian spirituality differs from spiritual formation in that spiritual formation looks toward the means of maturity, whereas spirituality explores the whole of the life.

3. Christian spirituality appears in a variety of forms. There are different forms of lived spiritual practice based on differences in personality, geography, situation, and the like. Spirituality takes on different forms of formulation when groups of people collect around ways of understanding the dynamics of relationship with God (for example, the Lutheran approach to spirituality). The academic discipline of Christian spirituality can take on different forms as distinct expressions of the aims and methods of the discipline are expressed.

4. Scholars and practitioners of Christian spirituality currently have a tendency to approach relationship with God from the perspective of describing actual life, to emphasize experience, to explore the corporate aspects of relationship with God, to permit careful study and personal transformation to influence one another, and to use a variety of disciplines in the exploration.

5. Although we may see a wide range of diversity in Christian spirituality, this diversity is built upon a few foundational principles. Christian spirituality is rooted in the sacred texts and teachings of the Christian faith. It assumes the reality of God and Spirit. It acknowledges the fullness of human experience. Our understanding of Christian spirituality is constructed in terms of the real relationship between God and humans, the possibility and actuality of God and humans sharing lives. It brings us to the recognition that the God-human relationship is ordered to be a relationship of love.
Questions

1. Why would anyone want to study Christian spirituality rather than that which is identified by mysticism, spiritual theology, or any of the other terms discussed in the chapter? To what do you personally look forward in encountering the world of Christian spirituality?

2. What kinds of literature do you think a scholar in Christian spirituality might read, as distinct from that read by a scholar in Christian theology or Christian history? What kinds of methods of study might be unique to Christian spirituality?

3. Toward which form of Christian spirituality are you inclined? Why?

4. What would you have to do, as a student of Christian spirituality, to maximize the possibilities and avoid the problems that arise from the current trends in Christian spirituality?

5. What are the foundational principles of Christian spirituality? How would big differences regarding one of these principles create differences in how a person practiced lived spirituality? Give examples.

6. What are Christian spirituality's big issues? Which of these issues are most interesting to you? Why?

Looking Further

Practice


Dynamics and Historical Models

*The Study of Spirituality*, edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), is a standard review of most of the primary historical figures and groups and the key themes in Christian spirituality. The Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press) is not a single book but rather an entire library of classics. Check out the entire selection. See also the three-volume series *Christian Spirituality* (published by Crossroad), which covers in greater depth and detail the history and themes of Christian spirituality. (These three volumes are also volumes 16–18 of the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*.)

Study