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"Spiritan Spirituality"? Possibilities and Limitations"

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Anthony Gittins, C.S.Sp.

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I place the phrase in quotation marks because I see it as problematic rather than self-evident.

“SPIRITAN SPIRITUALITY”? POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS. FROM FAR AWAY TO NEARER HOME

One evening many years ago and very far from home, I was sitting in a stone circle on a deserted beach as the sun slowly set behind me in the West. Staring intently Eastwards, I watched a darkening sky and even darker sea merge almost imperceptibly. A few yards away, seated on another stone that was more adequate than comfortable, was an old lady. Like me, she was looking East, but her gaze probed far beyond the horizon. I knew that long after I left she would continue to sit, immobile and utterly at peace, throughout the long night. When the first light of dawn began to bleach and transform the sky’s dark canvas, she would still be there, waiting and watching, entranced, or in pure contemplation, until her gaze could no longer withstand the blazing incandescence. Only then, finally averting her gaze and saving her vision from the blinding light, would she slowly and deliberately rise from her cold stone and prepare for another day.

We were in Kiribati (pronounced KIRI-BAS) in the Central Pacific, one of the remotest spots on earth, and the woman was a healer. But accused by the Church of superstitious practices, she had been condemned years before and officially ostracized ever since. Still she continued to offer her services, freely but clandestinely, to the great benefit of her clientele, virtually all of whom were baptized and active Church members, on this very Catholic island. Her belief in the God of Jesus was unwavering, and her commitment to healing remained unshaken. And although saddened by her detractors and her marginalization, her palpably authentic spirituality left in me an enduring impression far deeper than the cold, hard stones on which we sat.

This reflection addresses the topic, not of spirituality in general, and not even of Christian spirituality, but specifically of “Spiritan spirituality.” I place the phrase in quotation marks because I see it as problematic rather than self-evident. If it were accepted and uncontested, quotation marks would be unnecessary. But if the category “Spiritan spirituality” is hypothetical or at least contested, then they are. And if this were an academic debate (“This house accepts that ‘Spiritan spirituality’ is a clearly definable and valid category”) rather than an article, I would be perfectly happy to argue either side of the motion, because I think it is very well worth debating. I see the value of the phrase, yet would not want

to identify “Spiritian spirituality” as an absolute and free-standing category describing something entirely unique. But as this is an article rather than a debate, I will try to identify some components of spirituality that Spiritian spirituality shares with other kinds of spirituality, while noting certain aspects that Spiritians may embrace in a particular fashion precisely *as* Spiritians.

People In Particular, Spiritians In General – And Vice Versa

The great paradox that humanity must confront and negotiate is that human beings are all different – and yet all the same. Biologically, there is only one human race, even though it consists of great and wonderful diversity. And yet there are no “people in general”: there are only actual people, people in particular. And our particularity is largely a matter of culture and context. When we come to consider spirituality – defined originally by St. Jerome as identifying the qualitatively new or enhanced life we (all) enjoy by virtue of our common baptism, the same paradox surfaces: we are all the same as adopted children of God, and at the same time we are all different by virtue of our cultures, our circumstances and our individual character and temperament.

So, in order to say anything intelligible about “Spiritian spirituality,” this paradox must not be overlooked but acknowledged and faced. If spirituality can be described as “lived faith,” then obviously, at one level we all share a common spirituality through our common baptism and common call to discipleship. Yet, since we all live our faith as unique individuals, we embody and manifest our spirituality in a particular fashion. So, to argue the case for both sides of the paradox; on the one hand, it *is* valid and useful to speak of “Spiritian spirituality” in a unitary way, as something that all Spiritians are invited to live and to share. But, on the other, it may not be helpful if that were to claim that it is a legacy that only Spiritians enjoy, or that it is qualitatively different from “non-Spiritian Spirituality.” After all, when Jerome coined the word spirituality, he gave it both a specifically Christian connotation and a universal applicability (notwithstanding the later elaboration into “great” [Dominican, Franciscan] and “small” [‘simple faithful’] spiritualities).

The final document from the General Chapter of 2012 (Bagamoyo), describes or refers to some of the features of our “Spiritian spirituality.” We are to be “fervent in the Spirit” (*Bagamoyo* 1.1), though this is a quotation from Romans 12:11 and thus of very broad applicability. We are reminded that “The evangelization of the ‘poor’ is our purpose” (*Bagamoyo* 1.3 [SRL 4]), and the document declares that “we restate forcefully our mission to bear witness to the Gospel of justice, of peace and of

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reconciliation... [and] we renew once more our focus on education as a way to the integral liberation of individuals” (*Bagamoyo* 1.4). Thus, we clearly identify our Spiritan call to embody our spirituality in a characteristic way, though we should be aware that many other communities profess essentially the same commitment, and the call to discipleship surely embraces all such aspirations. Spiritans are not unique, though by our words and deeds we should be recognizable as living out our common call in particular ways, individual and congregational.

The Decisions of the Bagamoyo Chapter further call us to “give special attention to first evangelisation and to the new evangelisation (*Bagamoyo*, 1.7) (though “new evangelisation” remains an unclarified term, with more than 89 current definitions competing for space). Having added that “we have to be able to stay for a long time in one place” (*Bagamoyo*, 1.8) – which underscores both our *disponibilité* and our *stabilitas* (further putative markers of “Spiritan spirituality,” if you will), it moves to apply the formulation of John Paul II in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, that identifies “the dialogue of everyday life, the dialogue of collaborating in common projects, spiritual dialogue, and theological dialogue” (*Bagamoyo* 1.12). This is, of course, all very worthy, timely, and consistent with Spiritan values; but it is clearly not only the patrimony of Spiritans, and not unique to us.

One difficulty we might unwittingly create for ourselves is to imagine a “Spiritan spirituality” as something we can acquire, and which is then in no further need of being modified by our ongoing encounters with God, with others, and with creation as our life’s journey unfolds. But part, surely, of our spirituality is that it evolves and is shaped by our life- experience. Not to allow for that is to become closed to our own ongoing conversion, which ought to be a transformative experience. As Spiritans specifically (though this again is not unique to us) we are committed to God’s mission throughout our lives, and our commitment implies a calling and a sending to many persons, places, and circumstances. These serve to shape and (re)form our spirituality. If spirituality is about how the Holy Spirit relates to actual people (and *vice versa*), then culture – including history and context – and the specific person in concrete circumstances, are critically important variables. Unless we take them very seriously, we end up with a thoroughly impracticable and disembodied spirituality, which would not only be a double oxymoron but a rank impossibility. So let us try to construct a working definition of spirituality and then see how we might apply it to ourselves as Spiritans.

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One Way And Many Ways

One in the Spirit, united under one Lord and with one Faith and Baptism, we are nevertheless not clones, and our differences are real and not notional. Trying to follow the Way of Jesus, we nevertheless do so in many different ways, according to our circumstances and limitations. The Way of Jesus is open to all, and is not limited to any elite or to specialists only. In a classic text to newly baptized Christians, St. Jerome (who ‘invented’ the word spirituality), says: “Act in such a way that you progress in spirituality,”¹ clearly *not* implying a “one size fits all” spirituality. Consequently, I suggest a simple, practical and descriptive (rather than a theoretical or normative) definition of spirituality as “*a way of being in the world with God.*”

...spirituality as “a way of being in the world with God.”

The meaning and application of the word spirituality has evolved a great deal since St. Jerome’s minimalist and tightly focused definition (the new life of the Holy Spirit given to every baptized person). Now used in the plural, the word is applied both to “great” and “little” spiritualities.² Before the Middle Ages, no necessary dichotomy between spirit and body, or spirituality and embodiment, is postulated: they can, and indeed should coexist harmoniously in human persons. But gradually the body was seen as inferior to the spirit, and aspirations to authentic spirituality were understood to require a demeaning of the body in order to allow for a greater flourishing of the spirit. But of course, since there is no such thing as a dis-embodied human person (not to mention a generic one), a “one size fits all” spirituality would be frankly impossible; and since Jesus himself is the “Incarnate (Embodied, Human) One of God,” such an approach was bound to do violence to our humanity. Apparently forgetful of the clarity of Hebrews 2:16 (“For it was not the angels that God took to himself, but descent from Abraham, so that he could become as we are”), an influential current within Christian spirituality attempted to persuade people that the way to authentic spirituality required people to become quasi-angelic. We are not, cannot be, nor need we be angels. If it was good enough for God to become human, it should surely be good enough for humans to try to be the same.

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A Way

Every incarnated or embodied spirituality is, at one level, unique to each person. None of us is without a social and historical location. Even when the ground is shifting under us, we are always somewhere in particular and we remain a particular someone. Therefore our Christian spirituality will flourish or atrophy, relative to the way on which we are embarked and the way we proceed at any given moment.

Of Being

With two thousand years of Christianity behind us, and countless people who have “gone before us marked with the sign of faith,” it is evident that some people’s ways – or spiritual odysseys – began centuries ago in countries unknown to us. And others will be born into a world long after our own death and very different from ours. Likewise, Des Places and Libermann lived in worlds and circumstances we can never know for they are beyond our direct experience. There are, in other words, myriad acculturations (cross-cultural fertilizations) and inculturations (specific ways of living one’s faith in and through different cultures) of Christian spirituality. Furthermore, actual, existential states of being differ widely, both within and between individuals: some people are healthy, others sick; some rich, others poor; and during the course of a single life, a person may be alternately rich and poor, healthy and sick. A single lifetime may embrace *many* ways of being. Our spirituality – our experience of the life of God’s Spirit interacting with our lives – develops and matures (and perhaps atrophies) in the context of our ever-changing selves and circumstances. A standardized or generic spirituality cannot possibly sustain anyone over the course of a lifetime, and our relationship with God’s Spirit and with the “other” we encounter daily, must develop if it is not to die. The New Testament of course abounds with examples of widely different ways of being: from the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17) to the despised tax-collector (Luke 19:1-2), and from the Canaanite woman pleading for her daughter (Matt 15:21-28), to the synagogue leader pleading for his. These, and many more represent the countless incarnations or ways of being, that the Spirit of God, through the ministry of Jesus, came to restore, to Heal Or To Convert.

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In The World

With so many habitable bioregions and so many human cultures on the planet, it is obvious that there are in fact many “worlds” on this earth. Sometimes we even speak of different people living “worlds apart.” Diversity shapes human persons and determines much of our potential, including, significantly, the spiritual dimension. To journey from Australia’s Great Barrier Reef to the Mississippi delta, from the desert of Namibia to the glaciers of Alaska, or from tropical jungles in Costa Rica to Chicago’s magnificent Lake Michigan, is to encounter many worlds. These and a hundred other epiphanies are evidence of the hand of the Creator and the sweep of the Holy Spirit still brooding over creation. And this brings us to a final variable: God.

With God

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To consider God as a variable is certainly atypical thinking; to think of a variable God may smack of heresy. But to acknowledge that every single God-image and all God-language is unavoidably analogical rather than literal (since God is Mystery and all language and images fail) may help us avoid the dangers of polytheism or idolatry. If there is a temptation to make God in our own image and likeness through anthropomorphism, a greater temptation might be to hypostatize a single image – warrior, shepherd, king, lord, judge, child, lamb and so on – when God is simply beyond all imagining and when we can be enriched by enriching and expanding our images from the wealth of those available and found across the world's cultures. Our existential spirituality – our (daily) way of being in the world with God – can be imaginatively captured by poets like William Blake who spoke of our capacity to discover the Creator in creation, and

To see the world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

Or recall Francis Thompson, tormented yet ever-searching for God, and poetic creator of the indelible image of God as the *Hound of Heaven* who relentlessly yet lovingly seeks out the lost. He wrote *The Kingdom of God* with these opening lines:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

*The world is charged
with the grandeur of
God.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins offers us immensely powerful and evocative images:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed [...]
And for all this, nature is never spent; [...]

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah!
bright wings.

And Marty Haugen's popular rendering of the *Canticle of the Sun* says it lyrically too:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,

And all creation is singing for joy.

Come dance in the forest and play in the field,

And sing, sing to the glory of the Lord

*We might then say that
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subject is God...*

We might then say that the world itself is a kind of theology book – a work or opus whose subject is God; but, like other worthy books, it remains unread by too many people. Still, our spirituality, or developing relationship with God and God's creation, can and should be expanded and deepened by our continuing and intentional contact with other people, other worlds, and other images of God. For, although we can never adequately define God, God remains the defining component of Christian spirituality.

Since "spirituality" is not a single entity, it will be experienced and lived in numberless different ways, in different people and in different circumstances, each of which can be an authentic expression of Christian spirituality. So what, if anything, is left for something called "Spiritans spirituality"?

Spiritans Spirituality?

The *Decisions* of the 2012 General Chapter offer some useful hints. *1.11*, as already noted, speaks of dialogue and collaboration in our missionary ministry. I take this to be an invitation, specifically to ourselves as Spiritans, to be enriched in our spirituality by virtue of the actual people, locations and circumstances that become part of our ministerial lives. *1.26* is frankly declarative, stating that "more attention *will be given* to the natural environment," inviting us to develop a more holistic and ecology-minded spirituality. Declaration *1.32* is expressed likewise: "Through our personal witness ... *we will transmit* the Spiritans vision and ethos to all those involved in our educational establishments" (my italics). And finally, *Bagamoyo 3.1* addresses our spirituality thus: "Formation is a life-long process leading candidates to transformation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. [...] [W]e affirm that the Holy Spirit is the true agent of formation and works through the life[time] of candidates to bring them to maturity in Christ." This is perfectly consistent with St. Jerome, but it focuses on the *life-*

long development of the gift of the Spirit, rather than simply on the gift itself. And in the case of Spiritans, that gift should produce blossom and fruit within the context of, and shaped by, the Spiritan ethos and Spiritan living.

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Still, though we may therefore legitimately claim that our Christian spirituality has a distinctively Spiritan identity, we must also allow that identity to be colored or flavored by a wide variety of life-shaping encounters. A Nigerian Spiritan living and working in some part of Africa (or Europe), should develop elements of Spiritan spirituality that are rather different from a British Spiritan whose life's work has been in Africa (or Europe); and so on: different people in different or changing circumstances should be (differently) affected by those circumstances in the ways they pray, perceive the world, or respond to their particular encounters. The outcome will then be that, though we are *cor unum et anima una*, we are living our Spiritan identity and spirituality in an acceptable variety of ways, all of which should be personally and mutually enriching. Intercultural living – though difficult and challenging – would acknowledge this variety and attempt to honor, learn from, and likewise be mutually enriched by it. This would take us far beyond an assimilationist approach to formation, whereby candidates are simply expected to conform to some standard way of living, practiced – however worthily – by members of a dominant culture, whether national, tribal, or linguistic.

If each and all were seeking to be converted, everyone would discover that our enrichment comes both from the Holy Spirit and from mutuality.

In his challenging and inspiring Letter at Pentecost 2013, our Superior General, John Fogarty, emphasizes our Spiritan unity in diversity. He speaks of “the Spirit who brings us together into one large family” – “*from different cultures, continents and nations*,” as SRL 37 puts it. He then quotes Torre d’Aguilha, which states that our communities are “places where ... differences are acknowledged and affirmed without compromising unity.” What might this entail or demand, if we were to focus specifically on the way our Spiritan spirituality is lived out, embodied? John Fogarty then reminds us that Bagamoyo asked us to reflect on the issue of “*Spiritan culture*”. I would ask further: is it in fact possible for us to create a “Spiritan culture”? And I would like to say that, in principle it is indeed, provided we Spiritans attempt to do so with dedication (intentionality), mutuality, and tolerance, all of which demand a commitment to our own conversion. If each and all were seeking to be converted, everyone would discover that our enrichment comes both from the Holy Spirit and from mutuality. So, having offered a number of images of God from poets of the Western tradition, let me now offer some from elsewhere, as a stimulant and challenge to each of us, to think differently, and to expand our God images and our lived spirituality, as Spiritans united in our differences

and enriched by other traditions and insights, gathered from our *peregrinatio propter Christum* (pilgrimage on account of Christ) through many cultures, worlds, and ways of being with God.

Spirituality, says Gustavo Gutiérrez, is prior to theology; and unless it is incarnated in “lived practices,” says Terrence Tilley, it is no more than notional. But lived practices arise from particular people in particular contexts, and vary enormously. The Pingangnaktogmiut Inuit from Nunavut in Northern Canada and the Bidjandjadjara Aboriginals from Australia are as different as their names, and blond Scandinavians stand in striking contrast to ebony Shilluk from the Sudan. Different ways of being in the world with God are equally evident when we compare the control of a saffron-robed monk from Kampuchea, the abandon of a traditional Dogon healer from Mali, the controlled-abandon of a Sufi “whirling” dervish from Iraq or the placid contemplation of a healer awaiting the sunrise over the Pacific ocean. These represent only a fraction of the many ways humanity strives for God and perhaps even for a relationship with God. It is as unlikely that some are valid and other bogus, as it is possible that each can teach us all.

It is important to remember that the only way to be human is in and through our bodies.

It is important to remember that the only way to be human is in and through our bodies. We do not merely *have* bodies: we *are embodied*, incarnate. So unless our spirituality is radically embodied, it is not yet authentic, Christian, incarnational. Theologian Arthur Vogel brings the point home beautifully:

We can be incorporated into Christ’s body only in our own bodies, for only in them can the type of structure which is Christ’s body find its kind of being in us. There will be additional meaning in the Eucharist if we follow up in still more detail the parallel between our Christian lives in the body of Christ and our lives in our own bodies.³

Images Of God: Fragments Of Spirituality

Here is a Maasai prayer from Tanzania:

Creator God, we announce your goodness because it is clearly visible in the heavens where there is the light of the sun, the heat of the sun, and the light of night. There are rain clouds. The land itself shows your goodness, because it can be seen in the trees and their shade. It is clearly seen in the water and the grass, in the milking cows and in the cows that give us meat. Your love is visible all the time: morning and daytime, evening and night. Your love is great. We say “Thank you, our God!”⁴

From Zimbabwe, the Rozwi people crafted this beautiful prayer that describes their actual world:

O Great Spirit! Piler-up of the rocks into towering mountains! When you stamp on the stones the dust rises and fills the land. Hardness of the cliff; waters of the pool that turn into misty rain when stirred; gourd overflowing with oil! You are the one who calls the branching trees into life. You make the new seeds grow out of the ground so that they stand straight and tall. You have filled the land with people.⁵

Contrast the spirituality underlying a traditional prayer from the Chagga of Tanzania:

We know you God, Chief, Preserver, you who united the bush and the plain. You Lord, Chief, the Elephant indeed. You have sent us this bull which is of your own fashioning. Chief, receive this bull of your name. Heal the person to whom you gave it, and his children. Sow the seed of offspring within us, so that we may beget like bees. May our clan hold together, that it be not cleft in the land. May strangers not come to possess our groves. Now, Chief, Preserver, bless all that is rightly ours.⁶

The Dignity Of Difference

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes these wise words:

The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means nothing more or less than that *there is a difference between God and religion. ... God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.* ... This means that religious truth is not universal. What it does *not* mean is that religious truth is relative. There is a difference, all too often ignored, between absoluteness and universality.⁷

Sacks is adverting, surely, to the many local religions of the world; people subscribe to the Absoluteness of God without being consciously aware of, or particularly concerned with the scope – the universality – of God’s sway. But he is also saying that no single human articulation, no words and no language, can condense the whole divine-human saga in a single narrative or set of propositions. God is incomprehensible mystery. But, says Sacks, that is not the end of it: “We encounter God in the face of a stranger. God creates difference. Therefore it is in the one-who-is-different that we meet God.”⁸ This has echoes of Martin Buber:

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“Spiritun spirituality” can be a useful reminder of our common patrimony. It can remind us that we should drink deep from our own Spiritun wells. At the same time, those wells are not our exclusive property, and all charisms exist for others and not for hoarding.

The believing Jew lives in the consciousness that the proper place for his encounter with God lies in the ever-changing situations of life. ... The believing Jew hears God’s voice in a different way in the language spoken by unforeseen and chang[ing] situations. ... Difference is the source of value, and indeed of society itself. It is precisely because we are not the same, that our exchanges are not zero-sum encounters. Because each of us has something someone lacks, and we lack something someone else has, we gain by interaction.⁹

“Spiritun spirituality” can be a useful reminder of our common patrimony. It can remind us that we should drink deep from our own Spiritun wells. At the same time, those wells are not our exclusive property, and all charisms exist for others and not for hoarding. And as Sacks, Buber, and many others remind us – and as the poems and prayers identified above attest, every one of us is different, with exposure to different refractions of the multifacetedness of God, and therefore our spirituality is not identical with that of anyone else. And each and all of us can be enriched, mutually, and through our encounters with God and God’s creation throughout our lives.

Endnotes

¹Quoted in James Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.: 2006:2.

²Gustavo Gutierrez. *We Drink From Our Own Wells*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.: 1984:26-7.

³Arthur Vogel. *Is The Last Supper Finished? Secular Light on a Sacred Meal*. Sheed and Ward, New York, 1968: 74-83.

⁴In Anthony Gittins (ed). *Halleluiah for the Day! An African Prayer Book*. Liguori, MO.: 2002.

⁵In Anthony Gittins (ed). *op.cit.*

⁶In Gittins, *op.cit.*

⁷Jonathan Sacks. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Continuum, New York. 2002:55.

⁸Jonathan Sacks, *op.cit.* 59.

⁹Martin Buber. *Der Glaube der Propheten*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus. 1984: 14-15.