

Exploring attributes for an authentic Christian spirituality in an age of growing secularization and scepticism: A practical theological reflection

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Abstract

The focus of the article is to highlight authentic exponents of the Christian faith and to elicit the attributes of Christian spirituality. The first goal is to provide a backdrop of current notions and applications of spirituality and its impact on Christian spirituality. Secondly, to conceptualise spirituality in a universal sense. Thirdly, to examine spirituality within a Christian framework. With reference to the Christian context, biblical and theological resources such as the theology of Thurneysen (1963), Chmielewski (2017) and Ridderbos (1962), amongst others, will be applied. Biblical texts and leading authors on Christian spirituality will also be consulted. From these conceptualisations an analysis will be made regarding the different attributes of spirituality generically, and Christian spirituality, specifically. The methodological approach will be from a Christian hermeneutic perspective. Finally, conclusions will be made to highlight the findings regarding the features of authenticity and its link to attributes of Christian spirituality today.

Keywords

Christian spirituality; secularization; fragmentation; spiritual practice; practical theology

Introduction

Christian spirituality has become complex, diverse, and fragmented, defying rigid categorisation. Secularism and fragmentation had already

manifested in Christianity since early Medieval times, often as an adaptation to changes in society (Sheldrake 2013:175; Walmsley 2012:36; Heitink 2012). Transformation within the Church itself also brought major shifts in religion and spirituality (Walmsley 2012). Religion has since had a dubious and marginalized identity in an increasingly secularized world, seeking to transform and adapt in various ways to remain relevant amidst cultural shifts.

Essentially what Christian spirituality must guard above all is the loss of its transcendental attributes, its “Kingdom of God” connection and calling. This is as Davie et. al (2002:23) rightly contend, where Christian spirituality can be seen as being in tension with world values and beliefs.

There is, however, a move towards restoring Christian spirituality in spiritual praxis (Lombaard 2020). Surprisingly, this new quest for spirituality which seeks to foster a sense of hope and purposefulness, does not come merely from traditional forms of Christian faith. Research in the social and medical sciences, point to the importance of spirituality on human wholeness and psychosocial well-being and the re-introduction of spirituality into palliative care (Puchalski and Ferrell 2010:3–8). Spirituality in this context is however, often a universal, neutral form of spirituality (Pattison in Swift 2001). These developments highlight the need for re-emphasizing a *Christian* perspective in spirituality – not only to establish clear distinctions in spiritual criteria, but also to highlight the resources available for Christian spiritual praxis pertinent to addressing existential needs and the quest for the transcendent.

Fragmentation and secularism in spirituality

Fragmentation in religion and theology had its onset even prior to the Enlightenment but gained momentum during this period when the influence of science and philosophy became prominent. The result was the marginalization of religion to the private domain and the secularization of the public sphere (Taylor 2007). Farley has described the separation of theology (religion) from practice, i.e., the fragmentation of theology from “habitus to hermeneutics and the fragmentation of theology is its compartmentalisation into practice and theory” (Farley 1983b:34). This

compartmentalisation is reflected not only in practice and theory, but also in the academy and society (1983b:27).

A further theme which develops from this is the loss of theology as habitus, is its compensation for that loss through a focus on the social sciences and the therapeutic” (Farley 1983b:29; cf. May 1984; Benner 1998). Furthermore, this fragmentation resulted in the loss of authority of religion in both church and society.

Even though fragmentation in religion and spirituality were already evident in Medieval times, the onset of the Reformation resulted in dramatic transformation in religion and spirituality (Sheldrake 2013:115; Walmsley 2012; Heitink 2012; Schneiders 2003). The influence of science and philosophy during the Enlightenment served as a further catalyst to end the dominance of religion and spirituality in society. The dominant intellectual climate characteristic of Modernity, led to a preference for rationalism and objectivity – religion being marginalised to the moral and subjective (Walmsley 2012:36 Heitink 2012:140–144). Furthermore, the dominance of economic rationality and the influence of Marxist Theory, resulted in the pre-eminence of economic “rationality” and pragmatism (Sheldrake 2013:148–164; Heitink 2012:224–230; Walmsley 2012: 36–40). Post-modernism contributed to the development of a changed worldview which was informed by multi-pluralism and suspicion of ultimate truths. It advocated pluralism in thought and behaviour, impacting on culture, religion, and society (Lakeland 1997:60). Post-modernism refuted the notion of meta-narratives and ultimate truths and sought to foster localized truths and narratives. For Christianity and Spirituality this meant a further decline of institutionalised religion and a more ecumenical and globalised Christianity (Sheldrake 2013:175). Whereas previously religion and Christian spirituality as defined within the tradition of the Christian faith, had remained an unchallenged worldview for centuries, the onset of Modernity and Post-modernity further compounded the questioning of the authority of religion and entrenched the formation of a secular world view (Sheldrake 2013:2; Heitink 2012:43). It ushered in the *secularization* of societies, a development which unfolded parallel to post-modernism (Heitink 1993:52–54).

The secularization of society has resulted in changed world views and a secularized spirituality. It created a shift from the “supernatural”, where the divine action of God was pervasive, to a religious life characterised by the natural “everyday life” (Root 2009: 9; cf. Sheldrake 2013:2; Heitink 2012:45). Philosophy and the dominance of science were pivotal catalysts which pre-empted the fragmentation and marginalisation of religion and Christian spirituality, resulting in the dissipation of faith and belief (Heitink 2012:125–140).

Another significant shift in the changed nature of spirituality was the move from an interior spirituality to an integrated spirituality, which includes all human experience. According to Sheldrake this could be viewed in a positive light since it countered the older distinctions between the natural and the supernatural (2013:3).

However, authors like Swift (2009:142) regard today’s spirituality as being individualised and the consequence of consumerism, and the “conflagration of religion and modern paradigms such as psychology” – aptly underscoring Walmsley’s (2012) analysis of the attributes of a secularised spirituality. It confirms the current trend in spirituality which manifests outside the institution of the Church (Bischopps 2012:30). Although this might not be a negative development and has democratized spirituality to be accessible to those outside the institutional church, there has been a tendency to bypass and marginalize traditional Christianity as being irrelevant. I am inclined to agree with theologians who continue to value and foster the Christian tradition and its resources for the praxis of spirituality today. Schneiders, for instance, has argued for a rootedness of spirituality within the context of the Christian tradition to prevent harmful spiritual practices which have not been tested by the Church over time (2003).

Pattison (2000) critiques secular pastoral care and praxis and an equally secular spirituality in the care context. He views this current form of spirituality on which pastoral care is based as a “generic, religiously neutral” form of spirituality. It is not a Christian spirituality, but rather aligns with philosophy. Authentic Christian spirituality is based on biblical teaching and recognises the role of the Holy Spirit as divine and transcendent (Pattison 1997 in Orchard 2001:34).

Also from a Christian perspective, Peterson (1997) warns that there is a “dark side” to spirituality – a spirituality which is self-centred and individualistic. He sees this as a spirituality which develops into neurosis – it is fixated on self and self-glorification instead of glorifying God the Creator. From a Christian point of view, it can be viewed as a spirituality outside of the Gospel (1997:7). Apart from the disavowal of Christian beliefs, traditions, and the Word of God, Pattison, for instance, regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in spirituality and care, critiques the denial and neglect of the power of God in the person of the Holy Spirit (in Orchard 2001:36). These oversights and omissions are sacrilege from a Christian perspective since Christian spirituality is strongly vested on a Christian content based on the Word of God, the salvific work of Christ, his resurrection and his continued presence and work through his Holy Spirit. These dimensions of Christian faith are embodied and represented in various traditions and church doctrines (Schneiders 2003:166).

What becomes evident in the discussion above is a loss or marginalization of the supernatural and transcendental elements in Christian spirituality. With the onset of the Reformation and the Enlightenment the precedence was set for pragmatism and rationalism, and the marginalization of subjective beliefs. Hence the assimilation of the Reformed view of incorporating the divine into the secular (Walmsley 2012:32; Root 2009:40). In the search for a generic, personalised spirituality, the Church to remain relevant adapted and compromised its own spirituality and sought secular means such as psychological methods to adapt to the needs of modern and post-modern society (Stairs 2000:7; Oden 1984:40). It also neglected its transcendental dimension in spiritual praxis (Stone 1996:2).

In recent times there are even more dramatic examples of secular adaptation and succumbing to consumerism and secularism. Some evangelical churches have established multi-purpose complexes – where pastors had to be skilled as entrepreneurs to remain relevant in society (Root 2009:45; Peterson 1997:35–36). Other more established churches have formed alliances with Eastern spiritualities, to establish “spiritual centres” with goals of personal wellness and wholeness, quite apart from Christian tradition and the Gospel (Bischopps 2012:30). From the above discussion some themes emerge regarding the current complex nature of spirituality from a Christian context. For example, the secular adaptation of Christian

spirituality to remain relevant to changing times with a consequent loss of its unique Christian attributes. The effects on spiritual practise in the post-modern context has been especially profound.

The impact of secularity on Christian spiritual practise

From the above discussion the impact of secularization on religion and society is evident. The more pertinent question for this article pertains to the impact it has had on Christian faith and Christian faith practice. Schneiders notes that what distinguishes Christian spirituality from other spiritualities is its Christian content – which includes the tradition and doctrine of the Church (2003:169). Oden (1984:40) refers to Christ, the apostles, scriptures, and ancient ecumenical teaching as some of the core features of the Christian tradition.

Most authors on Christian spirituality agree that the Word of God or Scriptures – including the Old and New Testament form the basis of Christian spirituality (Sheldrake 2013; Waaijman 2002; Kourie & Kretzschmar 2005). Faith practice and ministry are described as the interpretation of the gospel to persons to make sense of their daily living. It is the mediation of faith as an integral way of life to persons, communities, and cultures and grappling, in faith, through existential issues (Swinton & Mowat 2006). Yet in the secularized milieu, faith does not seem to be shaping people's lives significantly. Instead, it has been reduced to a vague notion of "spirituality" and "psychological empowerment" (Walker & Parry 2014:39). This is attributed to a shift from *faith formation* to an emphasis on empowerment and healing of individuals. It is the consequence of faith having been subjected to a market-driven, consumer-based society. Faith communities are unable to compete with this culture in offering solutions for effective living (Volf in Scharen 2008: ix; Stairs 2000:9).

This crisis in faith formation can be relayed to differentiation and specialization (fragmentation) in theology and poor academic preparation for ministry. The result is a ministry which seeks practical solutions in psychology and other social sciences without linking it to theology. The traditional churches have to a large extent been unable to respond effectively to this challenge due to a lack of relevant skills and the appropriate "language" to interpret challenges related to transience and fluidity of post-modern societies (Roxburgh 2005:28–33; Stairs 2000:9; Farley 1986b).

Theologians have long warned against the influence of secularity in faith praxis and faith formation. In *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, Leech draws a clear distinction between a secular spirituality and a Christian spirituality (1986). For Leech, Christian spirituality is about “a process of formation” to the “likeness of Christ” (1986:5). He distinguishes between the secular values of psychology and the theological values of spirituality. Whereas Christian spirituality is about maturity in Christ, which is a *theological* goal, psychology has as its goal a balanced personality – an exclusively psychological goal. This difference is based on a difference in belief systems and values. Whereas psychology (and the social sciences) is based on philosophical belief systems, Christian spirituality is informed by growth and transformation through the Word of God. It is discipleship – a process of salvation and sanctification (Leech 1986:9–16). Alternatively, spiritual immaturity, or secular spirituality, within the Christian context, is associated with a neglect of the Holy Spirit and a focus on self and individual spiritual growth (Leech 1986:16).

Traditional Christian doctrine and spiritual resources have not taken the current socio-cultural context into account and are often found to be irrelevant in addressing the existential and spiritual needs of post-modern people. Post-modern spiritual seekers no longer find the traditions of the past relevant for the problems they are faced with (Heitink 2012; Walker & Parry 2014). Because of scepticism and suspicion of meta-narratives, the doctrines and traditions of traditional churches have been called into question. The result has been a decline in belief in God and unbelief or disinterest in the existence of God. More importantly, a social context in which there are many options regarding belief – multi-pluralism, is pervasive (Walker & Parry 2014; Taylor 2007).

In this context the impact on faith praxis has been profound. Berger (cited by Walker and Parry 2014) describes the psychological impact of increased pluralization of beliefs on religious believers. According to Berger social structures (plausibility structures) either reinforce or undermine beliefs. If these structures are not available to reinforce beliefs, such as in a post-structuralist, post-modern world, it undermines certainty in belief. Without direct re-enforcement by social structures, faith in God is marginalized and replaced by doubt and the lack of plausibility in religion (Walker & Parry 2014:35,36; cf. Taylor 2007). This is pertinent to the post-modern context

where multi-pluralism and preference for individual truths and localized narratives is the norm. This has profoundly impacted on Christian faith and praxis because of scepticism and suspicion in the meta-narrative of Christianity (Lyll 1995)

Roxburgh (2005), in his work, *The Sky is Falling*, sheds further light on the impact of Modernity and Post-modernity on *faith practice*. According to him this context is characterised by overwhelming and continuous changes in all spheres of society which he refers to as *discontinuous changes*. Alternatively, there are those who have never known the traditional, only discontinuous change. They find traditional church leaders as being “out of touch” with the demands of postmodern culture and find traditional structures irrelevant (Roxburgh 2005:21; Lakeland 1997). These two groups have increasingly been at odds with each other in the church context. Roxburgh proposes that church leaders cultivate new frameworks, and skills, even a new language in which to interpret and frame the current cultural context of discontinuity and transience (2005:51). By shifting their frameworks church leaders can re-imagine the Christian life in a new way to adapt to a world of discontinuous change (2005:53).

A further concern for ministry and the Christian faith is developing a “sustainable and academically legitimized” Christian faith as way of life, i.e., a theologically informed praxis for living (Volf in Scharen 2008: ix; Swinton & Mowatt 2006; Osmer 2008). Christian praxis should address the transience and uncertainty which spiritual seekers face in most areas of life and work, whilst remaining true to its identity as established in Christ and being a witness to the world (Bevans & Schroeder 2013).

However, these socio-cultural shifts, have created space for ecclesial reflection on the role of the church as being independent from scientific truth or normative rationality (Milbank as cited by Walker and Parry 2014:43). This requires critical reflection and a recontextualizing of the faith message to be relevant to the world in which we live today. It requires a “fresh improvisation of the faith that is both deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition but also alive to the worlds we now inhabit” (Walker & Parry 2014:44; Swinton & Mowat 2006; Bevans & Schroeder 2013).

Defining spirituality

The background discussion has brought into stark focus the importance of the current context in which spirituality is situated. Thus, in defining spirituality, cognisance should be taken of the context within which such definitions are framed, as spirituality today has been appropriated by various disciplines and professions – each inevitably defining it within their own body of knowledge and belief systems. Some of these beliefs systems can be either religious or non-religious. Religious values systems can be Christian or non-Christian. Non-religious belief systems often pertain to philosophical or ideological belief systems – as opposed to being theocentric. Religious spiritualities are theocentric, where God or a god is the focus of spirituality (Chmielewski 2017).

To address this distinction, authors on spirituality often first define spirituality within a broad, generic context, before defining it within the context of a particular belief system. For instance, Schneiders (2003), defines spirituality in the broad context as: “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (2003:68). This broad definition is aimed at being inclusive of both religious and non-religious spiritualities. In a similar sentiment to Sheldrake (2013), she is careful to be aware of criteria pertinent to sound spirituality so that “it does not include virtually anything that anyone espouses” (Schneiders 2003:68).

According to Schneiders (2003) there are certain characteristics inherent to spirituality. For instance, spirituality is an experience, it is not abstract, but personal, it is a lived experience with active and passive dimensions. Spirituality is also an experience of conscious involvement – it is not an accidental or perchance happening, nor is it merely episodic (Schneiders 2003:68). As Chmielewski states, it is reliant on human engagement (2017). According to Schneiders (2003) spirituality is not exclusive to rituals, but it is an integral part of a consciously pursued lifestyle which pertains to all areas of being human. As she states:

Spirituality is a project of life-integration which means that it is holistic, involving body and spirit, emotions and thought, activity and passivity, social and individual aspects of life. It is an effort

to bring all of life together in an integrated synthesis of ongoing growth and development (Schneiders 2003:68).

Finally, spirituality is about life-integration pursued through self-transcendence toward ultimate value. It is about pursuing the ultimate good in human living based on standards and values beyond human limitations. For a Christian context, this general definition is applied to the Christian tradition. Spirituality in the Christian context is vested in the triune God as revealed in Jesus and his Holy Spirit as being the ultimate value to whom Christians aspire in their spiritual quest. Christians share in the life of the Holy Spirit and find life integration and transformation in Christ. Christian spirituality is therefore defined by its Christian content (Schneiders 2003:168).

In similar fashion to Schneiders (2003), Chmielewski notes that spirituality can be defined as both religious and non-religious, as theistic, and atheistic (2017). In a generic sense spirituality is defined by him as: “beliefs, attitudes and actions of man in which he pursues his aspirations of transgression, which is understood as transcending his own temporal condition and current life situation” (Chmielewski 2017:146; Schneiders 2003). He also views spirituality as seeking the “highest good” – which can be defined both theistically and non-theistically. Theistic or religious spirituality has as its focus a god as the transcendent figure, whereas non-theistic or non-religious spirituality is not focused on a god but an ideology or a system of beliefs (Chmielewski 2017:146–148).

Chmielewski, in defining Christian spirituality, also equates it to a Christian content and context (2017:146). He argues that Christian and non-Christian spiritualities can be distinguished from each other as either natural (through human experience) or supernatural (through divine revelation) spiritualities. For Chmielewski, this qualitative distinction is based on the “self-revelation of the Holy Trinity in the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ” (2017:146). From a praxis perspective, Christian spirituality cannot be compared or reduced to any other religious and even non-religious (atheistic) spirituality (Chmielewski 2017:159). This distinction is made because Christian spirituality is not based only on subjective human experience, but through divine revelation. Hence, a further distinction of Christian spirituality is that it is the result of God’s grace. However,

because it is still reliant on human's ability to self-transcend, it is a property of human nature common to all religious spiritualities. Yet it is only in this regard (psycho-phenomenologically) that there is some commonality with all spiritualities (Chmielewski 2017:160; Schneiders 2003:162).

Common elements in both Schneiders (2003) and Chmielewski's (2017) definitions is that Christian spirituality consists of a Christian content and context. They argue that Christian and non-Christian spiritualities can be distinguished from each other as either natural (subjective through human experience) or supernatural (through divine revelation) spiritualities. For Chmielewski (2017), this qualitative distinction of non-Christian and Christian spiritualities is based on the "self-revelation of the Holy Trinity in the Incarnate Son of God, Jesús Christ" – which is of a biblical, "Trinitarian-Christological, ecclesiastical, sacramental and Marian nature" (Chmielewski 2017:46). The latter equates to a Christian content for spirituality, which is focused on the Word of God and the revelation of the Word through Jesus the Christ and his ongoing work through the Holy Spirit.

Sheldrake's (2013) also views Christian spiritually as being determined by Christian content – rooted in both the Old and New Testament. It has distinctive elements – namely discipleship based on a relationship with Jesus, and spirituality, as defined by the Scriptures (2013:25). A distinction is made between modern spiritual seekers who take initiative to seek the divine, and disciples who are called. One being sought by human effort (self-transcendence), and the other through divine revelation and initiative. This important distinction correlates with a "bottom-up" (inductive) and a "top-down" (deductive) spirituality which is highlighted by Chmielewski to clarify between "natural" and "supernatural" spiritualities (2017:160). It is a significant distinction in the discussion on religious and non-religious spiritualities.

Contemporary perspectives on spirituality

The application of spirituality in various spheres of society is well-documented. To gain an understanding of the fluidity of spirituality today, we reflect briefly on some perspectives of spirituality today. In the *academic* domain, Sheldrake's (2013:7) provides a scholastic framework for the study of Christian Spirituality which assists in clarifying various characteristics

and groupings of spirituality and aids in contextualising spirituality within the relevant socio-cultural and temporal frameworks.

Waaijman's contribution can be listed as a scholastic research tool for the study of spirituality. He differentiates between *lived spirituality* and the *discipline* of spirituality, to distinguish between the experiential and the scholastic (2002). From a Social Science perspective, Psychology and Sociology have contributed significantly to the phenomenological study of spirituality as an attribute of humans, and on how spirituality impacts on individuals, groups, and society (cf. Giordan & Swatos 2011: xi). Spirituality is also applied in an everyday lived context in various sectors in society. For instance, in the professional context, spirituality has been applied in the health care sector to address the spiritual needs of patients (Swift 2009; Roberts 2013). The field of lived spirituality extends over every aspect of human living – from the arts, music, science, to mention but a few (Sheldrake, 2013:220). They are too extensive to cover within the confines of this article. However, for the discussion here, we focus on the trend of the practise of New Spiritualities as a social phenomenon.

New spiritualities

In the introduction we have referred to the postmodern trend of the practice of spirituality outside of institutionalized religion. This phenomenon can be considered as one of the major themes in postmodern spirituality, having developed alongside the decline of institutionalised religion in the West. It is characterised by a trend of seeking alternative forms of spirituality to suit individual needs (Bisschops, 2012:24; Heitink 2012:224). Sociologists have developed the collective concept of *new spiritualities* to describe the phenomenon of the practice of spirituality outside of the institutional context of religion. Some characteristics of *new spirituality* does not have public representation or universally accepted dogmas, community rituals or cults. It is not an institutionalised spirituality, but an individualised spirituality, vested in the individual (Chmielewski 2017:146; Bisschops 2012:31).

In the post-modern era, spirituality can be defined as both *religious* and *non-religious*; as *theistic* or *atheistic*. In the first instance there is a personal God-Creator/Lord. In the second there is no personal God but only universal values which define such a spirituality e.g., goodness, truth – *new*

spirituality falls within this spectrum (Chmielewski 2017:146). The social sciences have appropriated this type of spirituality, placing emphasis on the centrality of transcendence of self and how it benefits personal well-being. (Chmielewski 2017:148, 149; Heitink, 2012:224). Although they espouse similar values to Christianity, there is a strong emphasis on humanism and well-being (Chmielewski 2017:148, 149).

New spirituality is very diverse and difficult to define, however, some key attributes include: 1) it is a process of individualisation and subjectivation – a distancing from or objection to institutionalised religion; 2) it supports transcendence and personal ability to transcend self and meet personal needs; 3) therefore means and ways are sought for transcendence in search of meaning; 4) religious faith is replaced by faith in self – thus a shift from community of faith to personal faith, with a focus on immanent goals and values (Chmielewski 2017:147).

The main distinguishing feature in *new spirituality* is that there is a shift from external religiosity to internal religiosity (spirituality). It is personal, intimate, and focused on the power within the individual to self-transcend and seek wholeness. This closely aligns with philosophical beliefs in self and self-empowerment. This spirituality is holistic, democratic, easily accessible, and non-hierarchical; it is opposed to institutionalised religion and is not church based (Chmielewski 2017: 147; Heitink 2012:224). A further characteristic is the tendency to incorporate selective practices from various religious traditions and Eastern religions; or assume a hybrid of practices to suit individual needs (Heitink 2012:227).

We have noted that spirituality falls within both the *religious and non-religious realms*. New spirituality is an atheistic spirituality without religion. Atheistic or non-religious spirituality is not based on religion, but on philosophical beliefs. A second tenet of atheistic spirituality is “rooting in the present”. It is focused on the horizontal rather than the vertical and is therefore strongly based on humanism (Chmielewski 2017:151). Chmielewski’s exposition on *new spirituality* reveals key attributes of a democratised and secular spirituality, outside of the religious context. It provides us with the distinctive elements of religious and non-religious spiritualities, establishing a basis for comparing the unique attributes of Christian spirituality.

Spirituality within the Christian context

Having examined the tenets of universal spirituality, we seek to examine the attributes of spirituality unique to the Christian context. In this regard we need to examine some concepts related to Christian spirituality, such as *religion* and *theology*.

Religion

Due to the confusion regarding the relationship between religion and spirituality, the terms are often used interchangeably. This is evident in the following definition of religion: “The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin term *religare* from *re* (again) and *ligare* (to bind). Thus, *religions* talk of *spiritual* experiences as the rebinding to God (Puchalski & Ferrell 2010:22). We will examine some of the elements of religion to understand what this rebinding entails.

The essence of religion has long been debated. It is fundamentally about *relationship*. Berkhof defines religion as being the “relationship to the absolute” (1983:7). He qualifies, however, that the absolute can only be known insofar as it is revealed in the phenomenal world and insofar there is *transcendence* beyond the phenomenal world (1983:7). Linked to this characteristic is the irreducibility and universality of the nature of religion – as it is inherent to humans and human consciousness and cannot be reduced or negated (Berkhof 1983:10–11). Berkhof’s characterization of religion, provides critical criteria for further illumination of the concept.

According to Wyttenbach, Religion is: “... the right way of knowing God and worshipping Him... and that ... religion does not differ from theology.” (*cited in* Heppe 1984:6). Three elements constitute religion:

- (1) Religion is not merely a knowing function but essentially a being function, i.e., indicating a *mode of living*. It shapes and determinates a human being’s inward existence.
- (2) It indicates vivid experiences of God, exhibited in and enfleshed as pardoning and unconditional love.
- (3) It implies by means of faith absolute dependence upon God. In this respect, religion means trusting the divine promises as revealed in

scripture (Calvin in Heppe 1984:6). Knowledge of God is natural in the sense that it is acquired by birth or inheritance. Faith as knowledge emanates from revelation through the Word. It is founded in God's loving kindness – revealed through the Spirit of God to redeem our sinful nature. Thus, the notion of grace alone which play a decisive rule in the reformed and protestant tradition.

In more recent definitions, the elements highlighted in the above definitions, are apparent. For instance, in Schneider's (2003) definition similar criteria emerge. Schneiders (2003:168) notes that religion is the: "fundamental life stance of the person who believes in *transcendent* reality, however designated, and assumes some realistic posture before that ultimate reality". Another element of religion, according to her, is that it involves "the total dependence of the creature on the source or matrix of being and life and gives rise to such attitudes and actions ... and reliance on the transcendent for help in living and dying." It can be seen as the root of "any spiritual quest" (Schneiders 2003:168). Religion denotes a spiritual tradition which emanates from an experience or revelation of the transcendent. Finally, religion denotes an institutionalized formulation (a kind of confession) of a particular spiritual tradition (2003:168).

Regarding the relationship between *religion* and *spirituality*, one could argue as Schneiders (2003) does, and has become apparent from the above descriptions, that the two are intrinsically intertwined. However, in the post-modern context this relationship has become problematic in that they are seen as being separate entities; rival entities, or two aspects of the same enterprise, which are in tension with each other (Schneiders, 2003:164). One cannot negate older conceptualizations such as Heppe and Wyttenbach which examine the relationship between the two more closely. Schneider's view further emphasizes the that the two are intertwined. I concur with this view of religion as the foundational context from which spirituality has its origin.

Theology and spirituality

A further aspect of the religious realm which is more systemized and pertains to the academy is that of *theology*. The relationship between

Christian spirituality and religion, although now being called into question, remains intertwined, as discussed in the previous section. The question now arises whether there is a link or a relationship between *theology* and *spirituality* – specifically Christian spirituality. Most authors align theology with systematised *knowledge* – either academic, or personal knowledge of God. They also interchange the term with religion – indicating how closely the terms are related. There are, however, some distinctions which hinge on personal knowledge as opposed to academic or objective knowledge.

Heppe (1984) distinguishes between *natural* theology and *revealed* theology. Natural theology refers to a natural, innate consciousness that there is a God. This consciousness was implanted in humans by God (Heppe 1984:1). Calvin describes theology as: ...”faith conjoined with serious fear of God” (as cited by Heppe 1984:5). Thus, knowledge alone does not suffice, reverence and worship are essential elements to theology/ religion. It is about experiential knowledge of God through his Holy Spirit and an awareness of our utter dependence on him (Heppe 1984:6; 1 John 5:7). There is thus a dialectic interplay between the experiential and the transcendental.

Practical theology and spirituality

Christian spirituality can be defined within a practical theological framework, the discipline most closely aligned with faith praxis (Osmer 2008:152; Louw 2000a:96). Here Swinton and Mowat’s formulation for Practical Theology is applied due to their emphasis on Christianity as the basis of the *praxis of belief* (2006:5; Schneiders 2003:166). Their framework is relevant for Christian spirituality in the current context as it recognises that, despite diversity in the practice of Christian belief, the integrity of the basic Christian narrative, be maintained. They also recognise the underlying tension between revelation and belief praxis (Swinton & Mowat, 2006:5). In the search for a nuanced interpretation of lived Christian praxis, their perspective is suitable for the current diverse socio-cultural milieu (cf. Schneiders 2003:166). They also recognize that although Practical Theology takes human experience seriously, it is not seen as the source of (divine) revelation (Swinton & Mowat 2006:5).

It is at this juncture where Christian Spirituality and theology share a distinct belief system, namely belief in a God who reveals himself through

divine action. In a Christian context Christ is seen as the revelation of God from God through Christ, his Word, and His Spirit. Practical Theology is interested in both practice and experience, but only in the sense and knowledge of it being an embodied faith praxis (Swinton & Mowat, 2006:5). Further theological insight for the divine-human relationship is provided by Thurneysen's biblical anthropology on human identity and relationship with the divine (Thurneysen 1963). The premise for Thurneysen's biblical anthropology is that humans are created by divine initiative. He considers humanity as "breathed upon" by God (1963:54; Gen 2:7). Divine-human interaction with God is through the Word of God and through the Spirit (Thurneysen 1963:54).

Key to Thurneysen's theology is the centrality of the role of God in His relationship to humankind. God takes the initiative in Creation, salvation, redemption, and sanctification. Thurneysen (1963:83) makes a strong argument for a biblically based theological praxis which can be applied to Christian spirituality today. His focus on the Word of God and the Spirit of God as *divine action* and *revelation* in the divine-human relationship, provides a Christian perspective for spirituality. A current theological anthropology is Chmielewski view of a spiritualised body or an embodied spirit (2017:158; Louw 2000a:162). In this theological perspective, Chmielewski introduces the truth-love axis, according to which humankind can self-transcend the material (carnal), by the spirit, drawing from love and truth. He considers spirituality as pertaining to all aspects of being human – hence the notion of an anthropogenic spirituality (2017:158).

Chmielewski (2017) claims that Anthropogenic spirituality can be expressed and is manifested in diverse ways – in all world religions. However, he distinguishes between Christian and non-Christian spiritualities. Whereas world religious spiritualities are "bottom-up" spiritualities, based on self-transcendence, Christian spirituality is characteristically top-down. He distinguishes between "natural" spiritualities and "supernatural" spiritualities – the first is based on human self-transcendence, the latter on *divine action* or *revelation* (2017:158).

In the debate on diversity in spiritualities, Chmielewski (2017:161) recognises that spirituality includes non-Christian manifestations of the

human spirit. Yet he qualifies that, although they can be acknowledged as spirituality, he cautions that, from a Christian perspective, it cannot be regarded as equal because of content (Chmielewski 2017:161). In the current debate on spirituality, Chmielewski provides a basis for distinguishing a uniquely Christian form of spirituality from world spiritualities by placing emphasis on divine action and revelation and the unique Christian content of Christian spirituality.

Christian spirituality: Transcendence and immanence

We have defined Christian spirituality as relational – seeking relationship with a transcendent God. From a Christian perspective, we note the themes of *transcendence*, *divine actions/initiative* in the salvation and restoration of creation and *immanence*. In Christian language and content these relate to the Kingdom of God, Incarnation, Jesus, the Trinity – are key attributes of Christian spirituality.

Other religions, as noted in our discussion, also believe in the transcendent, but in a Christian context this refers to a transcendent deity “whose power and sphere of influence is not limited by that of other gods” (Berkhof 1979:14:15). What distinguishes the God of the Christian faith from other gods was his *transcendence*, his *divine action*, and *revelation* of making Himself known – i.e., his immanence (Berkhof 1979:14,15). Berkhof describes this beautifully in his description of Abraham’s relationship with an unseen, a God who is also immanently close when he needs his intervention (1979:15). Another element in the God-human relationship is the importance of speech – the Word of God and obedience to and faith in God. Faith and belief are fundamental to the Christian faith and is key to the God-human relationship. This relationship is described in the Old and New Testament as the pillars of the Christian faith. For Christian faith the key attributes include transcendence, divine freedom, God’s personal coming to his creation and man’s sinful nature and confidence in a radical solution to this (sinful) nature (Berkhof 1979:19). These aspects will be highlighted in the following section.

Faith and belief in Christian spirituality

As Berkhof has highlighted, God’s revelation and divine action are in relationship to his creation and hinges closely on faith in God and

obedience to him (Berkhof 1979:14, 15). This is especially pertinent to Christian faith. In the conceptualisation of spirituality, we note that a key factor in spirituality is faith and belief in something or someone beyond the individual– a belief in transcendent values and the ultimate good (Schneiders 2003:166; Chmielewski, 2017:158). In the Christian context this refers to faith in a transcendent God (Berkhof 1979).

Taylor (2007) in considering faith, belief, and the notion of transcendence in a secular society, believes that transcendence is a state of divine encounter or transcendence; it is reaching a sense of fulfilment or wholeness which causes the material to recede and the transcendent to be all-encompassing. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor (2007) seeks to capture the essence of transcendence, by describing a spectrum of belief and disbelief regarding the measure of transcendence which the believer displays in worship (Taylor 2007). According to him:

On a spectrum of life where at some level either through an experience or activity, or condition, there lies a fullness, a richness (of experience) where life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more that it should be ... It is a condition of ... peace or wholeness ... (where we are) able to act on that level of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness – This fullness which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities, and points of reference (Taylor 2007:178).

According to Taylor, this condition of fullness provides a place of orientation to which we can steer our moral or spiritual life – described as the presence of God (2007:178). Conversely, this spectrum can also be applied in an opposite trajectory, where God is distant and absent and there is a loss of fullness (Taylor 2007:178). This structural analogy of gradients of belief in the spiritual life, is about belief, unbelief, and the measure to which the believer transcends self and yields to a power beyond self. This by its very nature is faith – the substance of things unseen yet believed. In the Christian context this would apply to a belief in God and his divine action. It is essentially about the transcendental nature of Christian faith and spirituality.

The Kingdom of God

As we have noted in our discussion above, the attributes inherent to Christian spirituality are characterised by the transcendental – an unseen God, transcendental and immanently close. Central to the transcendence and immanence of God in Christian spirituality is the Kingdom of God as revealed through the incarnation of Jesus and his continued presence through his Holy Spirit (Luke 1:9; Acts 1). The coming of the kingdom is about the revelation of God as creator, king, and redeemer of the world (Ridderbos 1962:222). These are the transcendental traits of the kingdom of God which “breakthrough” or transcend the temporal reality and point to a “new dispensation”. (Ridderbos 1962:5; Is 51:6; 60:19, 65). Ridderbos emphasises that “The kingdom of God is absolutely transcendent in its origin; it is the revelation of God’s glory” (1962:24).

The kingdom of God is dynamic – it is characteristic of the divine action and power of God (Ridderbos 1962:24–25). This is reflected in the miracles of Jesus in the gospels, notably Matthew. The kingdom of God is also Messianic, as is reflected in the coming of Jesus as Messiah (Ridderbos 1962:35–36). The kingdom of heaven has eschatological consequences and implications as it points to future judgement and expectations of the fulfilment of God’s word (Ridderbos 1962:37). It is thus a transcendental future order and reality. Yet it is also temporal or earthly in character. Because God is the creator of heaven and earth, there is no separation or dualism between God and the earth, between spirit and matter. In this sense Ridderbos refutes the dualism introduced by philosophy (1962:42–46). He concludes that the kingdom of God is not only a futuristic notion but is also an *immanent* present reality (Ridderbos 1962:51–52; Is 61:1; Mk 1:15; Lk 4:18,19). Ridderbos’ (1962) theology concurs with current theological thinking that the Kingdom of God is both futurist and immanently present through the power of his Spirit, thus manifesting God’s kingdom on earth (Leech 1997; Acts 1:9; Jn 14:15; Mt 28:31). This is the crux of a Christian spirituality, as expostulated by Moltmann’s theology of hope and Barth’s theology of the cross (Louw 2000b).

The Word and Holy Spirit

Christian spirituality reflects the relationship between the human and the divine and seeking the ultimate good and knowing God. Religion and

spirituality itself refer to “knowledge of God” (Schneiders 2003:166). It can be either a natural knowledge of God, i.e., innate knowledge of God implanted by God Himself, or knowledge through revelation – i.e., through His Word and through His divine action by the working of His Holy Spirit (Heppe 1984:12). Thurneysen’s theology illustrates the role of the Word and the Spirit in God’s revelation to his creation.

Berkhof underscores Thurneysen’s view: “revelation is an event of encounter”. This encounter is both divine and human. God makes the encounter possible, and humans respond (Berkhof 1983:56,57). It is a dialectic activity which takes place through the *Word* and the *Spirit*, describing the interplay between Word and Spirit, and Logos and Spirit in the creation of covenant between God and humans (Berkhof 1983:58).

Christian spirituality is not only knowledge of God, but also God’s revelation of his kindness and power (Wyttenbach in Heppe 1984:6). Christian spirituality is thus a dialectic action of seeking God on the one hand, and God’s revelation of himself on the other. The Spirit and the Word assist Christian spiritual seekers in this quest.

The Trinity

Closely linked to Jesus’ Messianic coming and his salvific work as God incarnate, is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is a central doctrine of Christianity and has received renewed focus in Christian theology – and is of import to Christian praxis today. The doctrine of the Trinity is essentially about relationship, as Bevans says it is a “dynamic, relational community of persons” (2005). The Trinity points to God’s redemption of the world, through the salvific work of Jesus (the Logos) and through the presence of his Holy Spirit. As Bevans states: “Through the presence of the Spirit and the concrete flesh and humanity of the Logos, God works for salvation ...” (2005:15). Through the Spirit God is still present in world events, therefore Christian praxis should be contextual as God “acts contextually”. Bevans is emphatic about Christian praxis being contextual. For Christian spirituality in the current social milieu of cultural pluralism and diversity, this key. Once again, through the doctrine of the Trinity we become aware of the faithfulness and immanence of God. For Christian spirituality this is central to seeking relationship with a God who is both transcendent, yet immanently close.

The Incarnation

Closely linked to Gods coming to the world, is the concept of the Incarnation of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:9). In Anabaptist ecclesiology, Mary the mother of Jesus is a central figure in the life of the Church. Mary's obedience to the Holy Spirit as vessel for the incarnation of Christ, is seen as an analogy for every believer to give birth to God's Word within him or herself. Mary is seen as the birth-giver to the Logos. Christ is the Word Incarnate, through Mary's receptivity and obedience to the Holy Spirit (2020:130,131, Bende & Long (eds.).

From a Reformed perspective, the Incarnation represents the extent of the love and intervention of God in the plight of humans that he chose through Jesus by way of the Incarnation through his Holy Spirit (Luke 1:9). It reflects God's compassion and identification with the plight of humans (Heitink 2012:286). Based on Gonzales' interpretation of Irenaeus, Bevans views the Incarnation as God's plan of redemption after the fall of Adam. Through Jesus, the Word who became flesh, became the New Adam, so reverting the history of fallen man (humans) to end Satan's yoke of slavery (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:64). This concurs with the theology of the cross as expostulated by Barth and Luther, emphasising the redemptive and faithful nature of God (Louw 2000: b). One of the current interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity which emphasise this view can be seen in Rowan Williams' interpretation of Balthasar's doctrine of the Trinity (2006).

The Resurrection

In the New Testament both the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection are regarded as equally significant and as the crux upon which the entire gospel rests (Ver Kuyl 1992:249). The resurrection exhibits the final aspect of the power of the Trinitarian relationship – God as being fully on Jesus' side against evil (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:63).

Barth's theology of the cross and Moltmann's Theology of Hope fully expostulates the significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (Louw 2000b:84). Moltmann's Theology of Hope highlights the crucifixion as being juxtaposed to the resurrection in its significance. Louw refers to this as *eschalugia crucis* – a dialectic relation between the crucified

Christ and the risen Christ (2000b:81). Through the Holy Spirit the divine power of God is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus (Louw 2000b:99). By conceptualizing spirituality within the Christian context, we can elicit the unique transcendental attributes of a Christian spirituality. These attributes reveal the distinct nature of Christian spirituality being vested in a transcendental God who reveals himself through divine revelation through the incarnation of Jesus, His Word and by the work of his Holy Spirit. Consequently, despite some universal attributes in world and Christian spiritualities, the distinctions are marked in that the emphases are quite unique. World spiritualities focus mainly on self-transcendence and self-empowerment, whereas Christian spirituality is vested in a unique Christian content and the divine-human relationship which is characterized by divine initiative and revelation.

Conclusion

In the introduction we note the extent of the secularisation of religion and spirituality throughout the ages, resulting in changed worldviews and the democratisation of spirituality. From the conceptualisation of spirituality, from both a generic and Christian perspective, key elements emerge which are characteristic of both, namely: transcendence, immanence and (ultimate) beliefs and relationship with the ultimate/transcendent (Schneiders 2003; Taylor 2007; Chmielewski 2017).

Through closer examination however, the differences can be discerned in content and belief systems – religious as opposed to non-religious, atheist, as opposed to theistic. A common thread in spirituality can be related to the natural attribute of all humans to be religious and to self-transcend. However, the attributes which distinguish Christian from world spiritualities are its transcendental attributes. In Christian spirituality the content is vested in Christian beliefs and traditions, also on the nature of the relationship between the divine and the created. In the Christian context the focus is on the divine initiative and divine revelation by a transcendent God. In the Christian context, God transcends the temporal and reveals himself supernaturally through salvation, recreation, and healing. God is both transcendent and immanent – sovereign Lord of the heavens and the earth (Ridderbos 1962:24). In this respect Schneiders

(2003), Thurneysen (1963), Chmielewski (2017) and Swinton and Mowat (2006), reveal common theological themes regarding the Christian content and nature of Christian spirituality – which point to the attributes peculiar to Christian spirituality. In seeking a Christian spirituality relevant to the current secular context, these transcendental attributes of the Christian faith need to be reconceptualized to be relevant amid multi-pluralism to address existential needs and the quest for the transcendent.

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