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# Spiritual Formation

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### Introduction

The *raison d'être* of our Bible schools will always remain: *the formation of all-round, mature Christians*, ready for service in the church at large. Maturity is expressed in three aspects: in what a person is, in what a person knows and in what a person is *able to do*.

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In the evaluation of our success, the second aspect is the easiest to be measured. An experienced teacher has a battery of tests and exams at his disposal. The third aspect is far more difficult. Yet, practical assignments, feedback from internships and personal observations yield a lot of information.

The first aspect, however, is the most important and at the same time the most difficult to verify. How do we evaluate human character? How do we estimate the strength of one's personal relationship with Christ? How do we foster this relationship in the first place? Why is the impact of the gospel on some Christians no more than skin-deep? Can we train someone into spirituality?

This is the more pressing since, at least in western Europe, more and more schools abandon the practice of housing their students in dormitories. Everybody lives on his/her own as 'externs', so the impact of the group and of the school is greatly weakened, for better or for worse.

Many of our students come to our schools because they feel spiritually insecure. They desire to be moulded into the plan of God for their lives and they tend to delegate the respon-

sibility for the outcome to the school. A school gets high praise if 'It brought me closer to God', and criticism centres mostly around disappointment in this regard!

We live in a time in which existentialist functionalism plays an important role. 'Religion is what religion does' was the conclusion of E.E. Evans-Pritchard.<sup>1</sup> Evans-Pritchard was a cultural anthropologist who moved away from the evolutionist approach of his day to a more functional approach. The burning question is no longer, 'Where does religion come from?', but 'How does it make me feel?', or 'What is the out-working in our lives and in society?' Many people realize that the religion of Jesus should do more in their inner beings.

We notice a deep sense of frustrated idealism in many religions. Maryse Condé<sup>2</sup> gives the memories of her hero concerning his professor in Islamics:

There are three levels in the life of Faith. The first is for the masses. Its standard is the Law. The second is for those who learned to master their shortcomings and who took the path towards Truth. The third is the privilege of only a few. Those who have reached this degree of perfection, contemplate God in Truth and in the Light that is beyond all colours. God's truth flowers on the fields of Mystical Love and on Love for the neighbour.

Her hero will go for the highest level! He fails miserably in the turmoil of animistic Africa, being destroyed by the slave trade, colonialism, Islam, Christianity, but most of all, by his

own carnal passions.

How many newcomers come to our schools, wide-eyed with expectation of the influx of power and determination that will flow through them, just by attending a Bible School? How many drop out too soon, confused and sometimes scarred by shattered illusions?

### A walk through history

Of course, our problem is not new. Let us look at a few historical approaches to Christian spirituality and the ways to reach it in the hope of finding some pointers for spiritual formation today.

#### A. Jewish spirituality<sup>3</sup>

Jewish spirituality, preferably called 'holiness', is achieved by the performance of God's will, according to the opening formula of some Jewish blessings: 'Blessed are You Lord our God, King of the Universe, who makes us holy through the performance of His commandments, and who commands us to...', after which follows a reference to the 613 commandments listed in the *Sculchan Aruch* of Joseph Caro (1488-1575).

The Mishnah says: 'This is the way of the Torah! A piece of bread with salt you will eat, a ration of water you will drink, upon the ground you will lie, a life of hardship you will lead, and you will labour in the Torah. If you do this "happy shall you be"—in this world and in the next.'

In Jewish spirituality, there is never a question of union with God, since there is no place for incarnation in Jewish thought, but rather of

1 Douglas Davies, 'The Study of Religion', in *Eerdman's Handbook to The Worlds Religions*, (Lion, 1982), p. 13.

2 Maryse Condé, *Ségou* Vol. 1, Dutch ed., (Amsterdam: Muntinga, 1990), p. 119.

3 Lionel Blue, 'Jewish Spirituality', in G.S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1983), p. 226.

'cleavage to God' by the performance of his will. This concentration on the Law greatly overrules feelings, personal relationships and sensations of ecstasy.

**Questions:** *Diligent study of Scripture (the Law) no doubt has a formative impact on the student. Sometimes we assume that the analysis of the Bible text is in itself all the spiritual formation we can offer. Do we, or should we, combine the study of Scripture with some physical hardship? Is a stern application of some set of (sometimes legalistic) Christian rules for life conducive to true spirituality?*

### B. Johannine spirituality

Entirely different is Johannine spirituality. It fully coincides with John's concept of 'eternal life'. Eternal life means life in Christ, which makes it deeply sacramental. John views all Christian experience as deriving from a unique conjunction<sup>4</sup> of the material and the spiritual in the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14). Eternal life is in Jesus and we have to abide in him. The mystery of reciprocal abiding is love (1 John 4:16). A life full of Christ finds its expression in worship, service and mission.

**Questions:** *Keywords : surrender to, and abiding in, Christ. Can these be fostered and 'measured' in our college activities? What do we do to ascertain that a student is 'born again'? Do we have the right to delve into the inner life of our students? And to 'meddle with' their moral life and social relations?*

<sup>4</sup> S.S. Smalley, 'Johannine Spirituality', in G.S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1983), p. 230.

### C. Pietist spirituality<sup>5</sup>

The Pietist movement has had a deep influence on our understanding of spirituality. Trond Enger sees its origin in a reaction against the orthodox Lutheran interpretation of justification as a forensic act. Sin was condemned, the sinner was saved, but sin remained, so life continued as it always had been. Pietism claims that re-birth of the sinner is the awakening to a life free from the power of sin. Re-birth means a total change, a participation in the divine nature, an experience of God's merciful action of saving the world and now me. The result has to be visible, mainly on the ethical level. Spiritual maturity is seen as the ability to fight and overcome actual sin. The ultimate salvation can be lost through evil deeds but is not deserved by good deeds.

In the fight against sin, the human will is not broken since it is badly needed in the battle, but the *Eigen-Wille* has to be renounced and made one with the will of Christ. This process requires a constant analysis of self and of one's motivations.

**Questions:** *The same questions as under Section B, above, come again to mind. Do we ourselves believe and experience that the re-birth enables us to fight and overcome sin? Do we make a 'Christian life-style' a prerequisite for graduation? Should this be stipulated in our Manuals for Accreditation?*

### D. Watchman Nee<sup>6</sup>

Although chronologically out of order, we now jump to Watchman

<sup>5</sup> Trond Enger, 'Pietism', in G.S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1983), p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> Gleaned from Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1977).

Nee. His strong emphasis on the tripartite nature of the person is remarkable, ascribing specific functions to the spirit (conscience, intuition, communion) and to the soul (volition, intellect, emotion). He gives an extensive analysis of these functions and explains how each of them is redeemed by the Holy Spirit and should be put under its full control. In like fashion he tries to explain how also every aspect of our physical life should be brought under the Spirit's dominion, involving victory over sickness and even death.

**Questions:** *Was Watchman Nee a super-Pietist? Do we dare teach the possibility of the Spirit's dominion over all spiritual and soul functions and even over the body and victory over the pangs of death? Do we guide students in the discovery of these realities?*

### E. Pentecostal spirituality<sup>7</sup>

In his most interesting book, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, Steven J. Land defends the immediate relationship between Pentecostal spirituality and Pentecostal theology, and how they are integrated in Pentecostal affections. He finishes with a 'trinitarian revisiting', trying to redirect the attention to a passion for the kingdom which is ultimately a passion for God.

The book contains pointers towards spiritual development, as, for example, a quote from Robert Roberts:

I have to yearn for the kingdom, seek it, treasure it, desire it, before the vision it gives me will amount to Christian spirituality—that is will amount to hope, peace, joy, compassion and gratitude as genuine emotions.

In this sense, Steven Land promotes motivation and zeal, and places spirituality in the eschatological tension of the 'already' and the 'not yet'. On the other hand, the Christian will find little in the form of a practical guide to spirituality in this line of thought.

**Questions:** *In general, we see indeed in Pentecostal Christians a more passionate yearning for more from God than we do with their more complacent Protestant/evangelical counterparts. We see a sometimes disturbing difference in approach to the charismata in charismatic and non-charismatic schools. Should we leave the handling of the charismata fully to the individual schools? Is there a place for them in our accreditation manuals?*

### F. Franciscan spirituality<sup>8</sup>

Now to make a jump back in history. Who of us has not been impressed by St. Francis of Assisi? 'He had a profound sense of God as transcendent mystery and holy love. Out of that sprang his passionate love of the Saviour. . . . Scripture and the liturgy were his sole guides on the journey to God and he sought to observe the Gospel literally. This was no form of fundamentalism or legalistic literalism. Literal observance meant a total commitment to the spiritual values the gospel proclaims.'

His disciple, Bonaventure, proclaims that Christ is our metaphysics and logic. All intellectual activity has to begin at this centre in order to arrive at wisdom, not just knowledge. Reason has its place in the soul's

7 Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 174.

8 Eric Doyle, OFM, 'Franciscan Spirituality', in G.S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1983), p. 159.

journey to God, but remains subject to faith. There comes a point where reason reaches its limits and then the will passes over into God. This spirituality has to lead man into a life of love, humility, poverty, denial of self and joyful dedication to Christ.

Obvious in the Franciscans is the definition of purpose and an indication of how to achieve spiritual maturity in applying imagination, the observance of nature, the final surrender of reason and the will to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

**Questions:** *Keywords: mysticism, passionate love for Christ, literal observation of the Gospel, the application of imagination and the observance of nature, wisdom, the surrender of the will and of reason to Christ. Are not some of our schools very poor in their attention to these elements? Is imagination for us a foe rather than a function to be developed? Do we do anything with the observance of nature? As a young man, I was deeply impressed by the Moody Science films. Evidently, they have been replaced by nature films by Attenborough, Discovery Channel and quite a few others. Do we ever use these materials (although they mostly are from pagan sources) to impress students (and ourselves) with the glory of God's creation? Do we pay attention to great spiritual music or visual art?*

### G. Jesuit spirituality<sup>10</sup>

Ignatius de Loyola saw 'all things as proceeding from the Trinity and becoming means by which one can make one's way to one's end, beati-

tude by glorifying God. "Glorifying" here means praising and entails serving. Ignatius' endeavour was to make all his activities result in praise to God greater than would have accrued to Him without them. From this worldview sprang many other characteristics of his spirituality. It is biblical, theological, trinitarian, christocentric, contemplative, apostolic, ecclesiastical and as adaptable as the Christian faith itself, and it found expression in all that Ignatius said, did or wrote and thereby won many followers.'<sup>11</sup>

Here we find a splendid list of criteria for what 'spirituality' should be and a fine statement on his personal integrity. Apparently, Ignatius was and lived what he preached.

Not all of us would be as enthusiastic as Ganss is about de Loyola. It cannot be denied, though, that here we find an amazing sense of purpose: the glory of God, and a strong determination to make this ideal work in his own life and in the lives of his disciples.

In his *Spiritual Exercises* he applied his worldview towards helping individual persons to discover God's will for themselves: How can they, by wise and prayerful decisions, fit themselves more co-operatively into his saving plan, in order to bring him greater glory from themselves and others?<sup>12</sup>

**Questions:** *Again we think on the imagination, the systematic training of the will and the senses, and this all very consciously for the greater glory of God. Do we apply any of these principles? How do we 'help individual persons to discover God's will for themselves'?*

9 Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 24.

10 Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, p. 24

11 George E. Ganss, SJ, 'Society of Jesus', in G.S. Wakefield (ed), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1983), p. 225.

12 Ganss, 'Society of Jesus,' p. 225.

*What do we find in our schools?*

I looked through some self-evaluation reports at hand in the EEAA office and found diverse syllabi on pneumatology, ethics, psychology, counselling, all containing items conducive to spiritual formation. There were also testimonies on how good the counselling in the school had been and how this would be a beacon for the student's own practice in the future. I found mention of mentoring programmes, cell groups for fellowship, counselling and prayer. But rarely did I find a syllabus on 'Spiritual Life' as such, either as a single course or a series of courses through the entire training period.

*The approach of Manuals of Accreditation*

Bible schools sometimes go through deep crises of conflict between faculty, staff and board members. Of course, nothing is more detrimental to spiritual formation than this. Should the accreditation of a school in conflict be suspended?

Spiritual life and moral life of course go hand in hand. The *Manual of Accreditation* of the EEAA has some questions in this regard in its

report forms, but nowhere is there written criteria. The Manual of TRACS says that 'Standards of behaviour must be established and maintained by the institution, that are consistent with moral and spiritual standards of biblical Christianity as set forth in the Scriptures. . . The institution's standards of conduct must enhance biblical moral values and personal discipline resulting in a lifestyle that respects the rights of others, provides caring service and outreach, and exemplifies a life of integrity and Christian values.' The 'Evaluative Criteria' repeat these requirements but do not give further details. None of this gives the evaluator any useful indicators on how to handle a situation turned sour.

*Final Questions*

Should this situation be changed? Should ICETE and its supporting associations be instrumental in devising clearer criteria for the spiritual formation of students? Should some of us devise a programme for training in spirituality to be sustained over the full period of our contact with students or even with alumni?

If so, feel free to pass on any suggestions.

## Divine Benevolence

*God's pre-emptive gesture of love,  
Has effected its redemptive purpose.  
Transformed by that singular expression of grace,  
We enjoy divine acceptance.*

From *Becoming . . .* (poetry reflecting theology) by Garry Harris,  
Adelaide, South Australia. (used with permission)