

Spirituality and Mission: Body, World, and Experience of God

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Our spirituality, our way of being in the world with God, can and should be expanded and deepened by our more intentional contact with other people, other worlds, and other images of God. As cross-cultural Christians and missionaries, our encounters with the otherness of our sisters and brothers and of their ways of being in the world with God constitute a privilege offered us by God.

Many years ago and very far away, sitting in a stone circle on a deserted beach as the sun was setting behind me, I found myself staring intently in the opposite direction, looking due east as sky and sea were merging imperceptibly. At my side, seated on another stone that was more adequate than comfortable, was an old lady. She, too, was looking due east, but her gaze saw far beyond the horizon. I knew that long after I left she would continue to sit and stare, immobile and at peace, throughout the long night, until the first rays of the next morning's sun would begin to paint the sky's dark canvas directly in front of her. And still she would sit, and wait, and watch—in a trance or an act of pure contemplation—until her gaze could no longer withstand the sun's blazing incandescence and, finally averting her eyes, she would rise and prepare for another day.

We were in the Central Pacific in one of the remotest spots on earth, and the woman was a healer. But accused by the church of superstitious practices, she

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had been condemned years before and officially shunned ever since. Still she continued to offer her healing services freely but clandestinely, to the great benefit of her clientele, virtually all of whom were active church members. Her belief in the God of Jesus remained unwavering, and her commitment to healing was unshaken. And though her sadness at her marginalization and at those who condemned her was her constant companion, her palpable spirituality left in me an enduring impression far deeper than the cold, hard stones on which we sat.

This reflection, on spirituality and mission, is in two parts and touches on several things: the enrichment to be gained from other persons whose ways are different from our own; the intrinsic relationship between culture and spirituality; and the danger of producing a generic spirituality that, by definition, applies to no one in particular. Given the radical particularity of every human person, a generic spirituality would not only fail to point to an authentic way of living but might actually lead people away from their true destiny. For if spirituality is about how the Holy Spirit relates to actual people (and vice versa), then culture (including history and context) and the human person in specific 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. First, then, I will try to construct a practical, working definition of Christian spirituality, and then I will briefly explore its cross-cultural, missionary implications.

One Way and Many Ways

I want to address the topic “Spiritual Ways,” but perhaps in an unconventional fashion. I want to acknowledge our real differences in terms of life experience and particular circumstances. But my starting point is our similarities: we are one in the Spirit and profess one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We are Christians, but we are not clones, though we all follow the Way of the One.

Christians have been called many things, not all of them flattering. But one of the earliest and most attractive designations was simply *people of “the Way,”* and the reference is to the path, the road, the *camino*, the *hodos*, the *via*—the Way of Jesus and to his wide-open and inclusive invitation: “Come, follow me.” It is easy to visualize Simon and Andrew leaving their nets to follow Jesus with enviable generosity along the unmarked sands of the Galilee shore (Mark 1:18); or Bartimeus, newly endowed with eyesight and insight, following him along the very public road from Jericho to Jerusalem (Mark 10:51); or the Gerasene demoniac who, with profound peace of mind and clarity of purpose, followed Jesus, if paradoxically, by being put back on the road to his own home and thence to the ten cities (Mark 5:20); or the clear-eyed blind man from Bethsaida, no longer tied to an old begging-ground or old ways but freed from the shame and offered a new circuit, a new way. They

all follow Jesus, as a witness both to one who heals and to the Way on which he was embarked (Mark 8:26). But however we think of the way, of those who follow it, or of the one who leads, a paradox or puzzle runs right through the heart of the story: the way is unique, but the ways of following it are virtually countless.

For 2,000 years and from every part of the globe, people have come to Jesus in order to be sent, whether across the vastness of oceans separating them from exotic “others,” across the streets closer to home where more local “others” live, or across the thresholds of their own residences to encounter the intimate “others” of their own family but in new and more compassionate ways. And there have always been people with imagination who realized that there are many ways to follow the way of Jesus and the Jesus who was himself “the Way.” Yet apparently, and sadly, millions have thought, and many still think, that such following and such commitment are not for them and not for the many but only for the few: the elite, the professionals, the heavy-hitters among the baptized. How could we have so poorly understood that the invitation is extended to everyone? How could we have so palpably failed to make it more widely known to our own contemporaries? How could we have narrowed *his way* to our own conventional practices, often expecting other people to do things precisely *our way*, as the way for them to be faithful to his way and to him? And how is it that despite ecclesial dogmatism or personal self-righteousness, so many people even today seem rudderless or floundering, or feel isolated and unsupported as they strive to survive and find meaning in today’s world?

Our Christian tradition teaches that those who walk in righteousness and in the Way of the Lord will neither flounder nor simply walk by sight. We are assured that, however narrow the way, it can be found by those who seek and are willing to be led, though the Risen Christ warned the repentant Peter—and us—that he would be led in ways he might rather not go (John 21:18). To walk by faith and to venture beyond our comfort zone requires three things: a trustworthy guide (the Holy Spirit); an internal compass (an informed conscience); and a rare blend of trust, risk, and imagination. We need to appropriate not simply a spirituality plucked from the contemporary tree of knowledge and personal, private experience, but one whose credentials and potentiality make it authentically Christian yet capable of being embodied in countless people’s lives. Christian spirituality is rooted in the life and person of Jesus, the incarnate one of God, but its challenge is to bear fruit across far-flung continents and cultures, age after age and across the whole gamut of humanity—for such is the body of Christ and, furthermore, humanity’s natural habitat covers the entire face of the earth.

Clarifying Terms

During two millennia, the denotations of the word “spirituality” have undergone multiple modifications and some serious distortions. We can even distinguish

“great” spirituality, connected to historical movements, and “little” spirituality, connected to the ordinary, daily rhythms of our lives (see Gutiérrez, 26–27). When first used in Latin in the fifth century, Jerome (or a contemporary) followed the Pauline intuition that the primary referent was the Holy Spirit of God (Wiseman, 2). In a classic text to a newly baptized person, Jerome says: “Act in such a way that you progress in spirituality”—which is life according to the Spirit given in baptism (Wiseman, 2). Before the Middle Ages there is no necessary dichotomy or opposition between spirit and body, spirituality and embodiment. They can and should coexist harmoniously in human persons. Just as our lives ought to be consistent with our nature and human dignity—incarnated, enfleshed, embodied—so with our nature as spiritual beings. After all, we have become the dwelling place of God’s own Spirit, the Comforter, Advocate, and Sanctifier promised by Jesus to all, without exception, who follow his way (John 15:26; 16:7,13).

Exactly how human persons undertake to follow the way must be understood in very particular terms, simply because there are no generic people; people are specific. “People” is a class noun, an abstraction, only realized concretely in actual persons, individual and collective. Although people, like language, can be found universally, there is simply no such thing as a universal person or language: only particular, specific persons and languages. And since human beings are all the same and yet all different, there cannot be any such thing as generic, standardized, or “one size fits all” spirituality. Consequently I will work through a simple, practical, descriptive (rather than theoretical or normative) definition of spirituality: *a way of being in the world with God*. Each term has—significantly and not accidentally—multiple applications, so we take them in sequence.

A Way . . .

Because every person is unique, every incarnated or lived-out spirituality represents *a* way of life. It is not incidental that each individual has a particular social location or set of circumstances, a distinct perspective or angle, and a personal center or starting point from which he or she ventures out and to which they return. No two persons’ circumstances are identical, and no single individual is utterly rootless or without a reference point. Even when the ground is shifting under us, we are always somewhere in particular and we remain a particular someone. Before us is a way, or ways, not yet traveled; behind us, the way we have come: but every person is situated, on a way or a path, going somewhere and coming from somewhere. Christian spirituality will develop or atrophy, relative to the way on which we are embarked and the way we proceed at any particular moment.

. . . of Being . . .

Some people’s ways—or life journeys—began centuries ago in countries unknown to us. Two thousand years of Christianity across the continents and beyond the seas attest to this. Others will begin long after our own death and in worlds

we simply cannot imagine; our own sense of history and of the multiple acculturations and inculturations of Christianity assures us of the truth of this. There is far, far more to human life than our own particular or chosen way of living or our own personal or cultural way of understanding or experiencing. Because every person's way is ultimately particular and unique, God's encounters with humanity must be as varied as leaves in a forest or blades of grass in a field (Gutiérrez, 53). But individual people's actual state of being also differs widely; some are healthy and rich, others sick and poor. Moreover, ways of being or existential experiences are not only irreducible but often incommensurate.

*Each individual
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But beyond that truism is another simple but profoundly significant fact: Each individual person will experience *many* ways of being on the journey from infancy through childhood to maturity and decline. Individual lives may be marked *both* by health and by sickness; *both* by peace of mind and by intense mental distress; *both* by a sense of deep belonging and feelings of aching isolation; and so on. Our spirituality—our experience of the life of God's Spirit interacting with our lives—develops, matures, and perhaps shrivels, in the context of our ever-changing selves and circumstances, our existential progress through life, and our multiple and changing ways of experiencing life and of being human. Though no two people are identical and no two lives quite the

same, the one Spirit of God seeks to vivify each person, precisely in their uniqueness, marked by their differences, their particularity and their shifting perceptions, perspectives, and needs. A standardized or generic spirituality cannot possibly sustain anyone over a whole lifetime, and our relationship with the Spirit of God and with the "other" we encounter daily must develop if it is not to die. It must, in other words, be continuously tempered like steel, lest it lose its resilience or tensile strength.

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 19:1-9); from the Canaanite woman pleading for her daughter (Matt 15:21-28) to the synagogue leader begging for his, these (and so many more) represent the countless incarnations or ways of being that the Spirit of God through the ministry of Jesus came to restore, heal, and convert.

. . . in the World . . .

We live, it is said, not in the world or even the universe, but in a world and a multiverse. With so many bioregions and diverse habitats, and so many social

entities or cultures, even the world we know is almost as diverse as its people, yet there are worlds we will never know, inhabited by people far beyond our ken. For good or ill, that very diversity shapes human persons and determines much of their potential, including, significantly, the spiritual.

On a bus journey between Moshi and Arusha in Tanzania, I sat wide-eyed for two hours watching first ostriches, then lions, then camels and monkeys, giraffes and zebras against the background of the majestic, snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro, bathed in the afternoon sun. This was a world I had hardly imagined and never experienced. Yet there are so many worlds under the sun, and each of us has encountered some: from Australia's Great Barrier Reef to the delta of the mighty Mississippi; from Saharan sand-dunes advancing almost at walking pace to ancient glaciers visibly retreating in the face of global warming; from a tropical jungle in Central America or Central Africa, to Chicago's Lake Front when the blossoms are breathtaking and the boats majestic under full sail. These and a hundred other epiphanies are evidence of a world in myriad shapes and forms that is a window on the Creator for anyone inspired or moved by God's Spirit. This brings us to the final variable in our description of spirituality: God.

. . . *with God*

To think of God as a variable may make some people wince; to think of a variable God may sound like heresy. But to acknowledge that every single God-image and all God-language is unavoidably analogical rather than literal should help us avoid the dangers of polytheism or idolatry. There may be some danger of making God in our own image and likeness, yet a greater danger might be hypostatizing a single image—warrior, king, judge, infant, child, shepherd, lamb—when God is simply beyond imagining and we can be enriched by such a wealth of actual or possible images. We all have favorite examples, but poets are particularly adept at finding *le mot juste*. William Blake famously spoke of our capacity to find 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 Francis Thompson, tormented yet ever searching for God, and creator of the indelible image of God as the *Hound of Heaven* who relentlessly yet lovingly seeks out the lost, 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.

Gerard Manley Hopkins too, 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 a 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 come play in the field,
And sing, sing to the glory of the Lord. (Haugen)

The world, we might say, is a theology book—a work or opus whose subject is God, but, like other worthy books, it remains unread by many. Still, our spirituality, our developing relationship with God, can and should be expanded and deepened by our more intentional contact with other people, other worlds, and of course other images of God, for, although we can never adequately define God, God remains the defining component of Christian spirituality.

So much then, for a working definition of spirituality as “a way of being in the world with God.” We can now look at some illustrative examples of how such an understanding might be of particular value in the context of our cross-cultural and missionary outreach.

Embodied Spirituality and Human Diversity

To repeat: spirituality is no vacuum-packed commodity, but it only exists in particular persons, times, and places; it is “lived practices,” in Terrence Tilley’s phrase. Rather than in formal or systematized theory, it manifests itself, historically, contextually, and individually, in countless forms. Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us that spirituality is prior to theology; it is praxis, and theology is subsequent reflection and theory (35). But since spirituality is inseparable from the self, and since people are necessarily embodied in unique yet changing forms, a number of intriguing questions arise: How varied are people’s experiences of embodiment? How does such variation affect relationships, whether between persons, with the wider world, or with God? Can we actually track some correlation between types of spiritual experience and (a) personal experience of the self or the body and (b)

the effects of the wider environment? In short, can we specify a relationship between different lived experiences and different ways of experiencing the Creator? Can we specify different aspects or expressions of spirituality? And how might such research provide real insights for any of us as we attempt to deepen our own experience of God through cross-cultural encounters? A detailed exploration is impossible here, but I offer some tentative observations.

The human species encompasses enormous cultural variation: The Pingangnaktogmiut Inuit from Nunavut in Northern Canada and the Bidjandjadjara Aborigines from Australia are as different as their names, and blond Scandinavians stand in striking contrast to ebony Shilluk of the Sudan. But different ways of being in the world with God are equally evident if we compare the control of a saffron-robed monk from Kampuchea, the abandon of a traditional Dogon healer from Mali, the controlled abandon of the Sufi “whirling” dervish from Iraq or the placid contemplation of a healer awaiting the sunrise over a Pacific lagoon. These represent only a fraction of the many ways humanity strives for God and even for a relationship with God. It is as unlikely that some are valid and others bogus, as it is possible that each can teach the rest of us who live in this world—a world so capable of communicating myriad experiences of the human and the divine to people so much in need of such communications if we are to live together harmoniously and in mutual respect and enrichment.

Because human beings are not disembodied spirits but radically incarnate or embodied, our spirituality must necessarily acknowledge, respect and grow from that premise. We do not simply *have* bodies (as we *have* or *own* shoes or socks); *we are embodied*. There is no other way to be human. Christianity is the religion *par excellence* of incarnation: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Yet sadly, Christians have found it historically very difficult to develop a truly integrated, incarnate spirituality, often feeling a decided dis-ease with their own bodies. Such dis-ease is symptomatic of an unwholesome or disintegrated spirituality. Theologian Beverly W. Harrison draws appropriate attention to this with her call to live radically in our bodies. Our bodies are sanctified; we are temples of the Spirit of God, and this is empowering and enabling. She says:

We may wish, like children, that we did not have such awesome power for good or evil. But the fact is we do. The power to receive and give love, or withhold it—that is, to withhold the gift of life—is less dramatic but every bit as awesome as our technological power. And—as women we are never likely to forget—the exercise of that power begins, and is rooted, in our bodies, ourselves. If we begin with “our bodies, ourselves,” we recognize that all our knowledge, including our moral knowledge, is body mediated. Failure to live deeply in “our bodies, ourselves,” destroys the possibility of moral relations between us.” (46–49)

And she continues thoughtfully:

Relationality is at the heart of all things. To speak of a theology of relation however . . . is to insist on the deep, total sociality of all things. All things cohere in each other. Nothing living is self-contained; if there were such a thing as an unrelated individual, none of us would know it. (50)

So unless and until our spirituality is radically embodied, it is not yet authentic, incarnational, Christian. And 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. (74–83)

Images of God, Paths to the Mystery

Images of God, from the abstract to the concrete, from the familiar to the novel, can provide grist to this particular intellectual mill. Here is a selection: First, a Maasai prayer:

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 water and 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!" (In Gittins 2002)

From South Africa, the Rozwi people crafted this litany-like prayer:

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 new seeds grow out of the ground so that they stand straight and tall. You have filled the land with people. (In Gittins 2002)

And contrast this prayer from the Chagga of Tanzania. These hunter-pastoralists struggle to eke out a living, and when they slaughter an animal, they respectfully acknowledge their dependence on the Creator:

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 the 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. (In Gittins 2002)

The Dignity of Difference

A final comment may serve both as a summary and an encouragement. In a recent book, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, writes these 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 it is relative. This does not mean that religious truth is relative. There is a difference, all too often ignored, between absoluteness and universality. (55)

Sacks is adverting, surely, to the reality of so many local religions of Africa, Oceania, Asia, and elsewhere; people subscribe to the Absoluteness of God without being either consciously aware or particularly concerned with the scope—universality—of God’s sway. A local religion is, after all, local—and not universal or universalizing. But he is also saying that no single human articulation, no words and no language, can condense the whole human-divine saga in one single narrative or set of propositions. So we must always defer to and leave space for the moral and existential validity of the religious “other,” even as we hold firmly to our own faith traditions. He continues:

We encounter God in the face of a stranger. That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible’s single greatest and most counterintuitive contribution to ethics. God creates difference; therefore it is in the one-who-is-different that we meet God. (59)

Another Jewish philosopher-theologian, Martin Buber had a similar thought:

The believing Jew lives in the consciousness that the proper place for his encounter with God lies in the ever-changing situations of life. . . . Again and again, the believing Jew hears God’s voice in a different way in the language spoken by unforeseen and chang[ing] situations.

Rabbi Sacks then leaves us with this reflection:

. . . *Difference* is the source of value, and indeed of society itself. It is precisely because we are not the same, as individuals, nations or civilizations that our exchanges are non-zero-sum encounters. Because each of us has something someone lacks, and we lack something someone else has, we gain by interaction. (14–15)

Difference does not diminish; it enlarges the sphere of human possibilities. We will learn to live with diversity once we understand the God-given, world-enhancing dignity of difference. (209)

As cross-cultural Christians and missionaries, our encounters with the otherness of our sisters and brothers and of their ways of being in the world with God constitute a privilege offered us by the God who is both transcendent and immanent; elusive yet intimate; totally other yet, in Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

Starting with the Other

I close with a well-known question from a teacher, sage, or rabbi: “When do you know it is dawn?” One student said, “When you can make out a tree on the far horizon.” Another thought it was when a black thread can be distinguished from a white one; and yet another said that when a sheepdog and a sheep can be told apart, then you know it is dawn. But none of these met with approval. And when no more suggestions were forthcoming, the teacher said, “When you can look into the eyes of a stranger and see your sister or brother, then it is dawn; until then, it is still night.”

The “other” may not be the starting point for an authentic spirituality, but the other is certainly a *sine qua non* for any and all committed to the mission of God, church, and discipleship. Whether on an atoll in the Pacific or a street corner in Chicago, sisters and brothers, with their multifarious ways of being in the world with God, can challenge and enrich our own spirituality and be lessons for us all.

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