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Spring 2007

## Spirituality: Its Uses and Misuses

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Christie, Douglas E., "Spirituality: Its Uses and Misuses" (2007). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 50.  
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## Spirituality: Its Uses and Misuses

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE

What does it mean to ask about the uses and misuses of spirituality? The very title of this symposium might suggest that our primary concerns have to do with patrolling the boundaries and establishing clear lines of demarcation between authentic and inauthentic, coherent and incoherent, morally sound and immoral or amoral spiritual ideas and practices. That faith communities have long been concerned with questions of normativity does little to allay fears in the contemporary mind that such questions have as much to do with the exercise of authority and suspicion of difference as they do with understanding and describing spiritual experience on its own terms, in all its maddening complexity and ambiguity. One could rightly ask: on what grounds are such questions being posed? On behalf of whose interests? And by whose authority?

At first glance, evaluative questions concerning the uses and misuses of spirituality would seem to be most at home in a confessional setting, where at least some boundaries—theological, creedal, liturgical—already exist. But in truth, questions of boundaries and definitions matter just as deeply within the broader, non-confessional settings in which so much scholarly study of spirituality takes place today.

The field of spirituality—certainly the field of Christian spirituality—is still relatively young. In spite of (or perhaps because of) the astonishing growth in the number and range of scholars being drawn to this field, questions concerning the very meaning of the term spirituality, as well as what constitutes the primary subject matter of the field and the most useful methodological approaches for interpreting spiritual experience remain highly contested. Whether the primary approach to the study of spirituality is theological-confessional or phenomenological-descriptive—there are evaluative judgments being made all the time. And these judgments pertain not only to the character and value of a particular expression of spiritual experience, but also to the best way to think about or understand that experience.

For example, is it the case, as some would argue, that theological concerns should always be considered as part of any assessment of the meaning of spiritual experience? Or does this already betray a prejudice on the part of the scholar that ought to be bracketed in favor of a more detached, phenomeno-

logical description of such experience? Such a sharp juxtaposition of approaches is, of course, too simple. Much scholarship in the field attempts to bridge these worlds, taking utterly seriously the need for careful description of the shape and texture of spiritual experience on its own terms, while also asking questions about the enduring sense of God or the holy or the transcendent that emerges from such work, and the possible value this might have for contemporary seekers or believers.<sup>1</sup>

Such an approach might well seem hopelessly confused or contradictory. Is it really possible, after all, to be both engaged and detached; to simultaneously participate and evaluate?<sup>2</sup> This is a difficult but important question and I wish to underline it here, because I think it bears directly upon one of the main purposes of this symposium, which is to reflect critically on how best to think about and understand spiritual experience. Developing a critical awareness of how one's fundamental assumptions and prejudices, and one's location as a scholar influence one's orientation to the questions, is crucial. There has been much discussion among scholars of spirituality about the "self-implicating" character of work in this field—the particular challenge that often faces scholars as they contend with material or questions that seem to demand from them something more than a detached, evaluative response. To engage this challenge honestly and openly can in fact be understood as *integral* to the work of critical reflection, a deeply ethical engagement on the part of the scholar.<sup>3</sup> But there are dangers too, for one can easily fall prey to an uncritical selectivity; a particular investment in the *value* of certain spiritual experience can blind one to need to attend to other, different, and less obviously valuable or edifying dimensions of experience.<sup>4</sup>

It is tempting, in light of these challenges, to reframe the discussion altogether, to dispense with any thought of establishing standards or criteria with which to judge and evaluate spiritual ideas and practices. But this seems problematic in other ways, especially if we think of the compelling need to assess and evaluate currents at work in our contemporary world. We still carry with us the painful memory of events in Waco and Jonestown. And the meaning of the events of September 11—especially the meaning of martyrdom and sacrifice—remains profoundly contested and unresolved.<sup>5</sup> One thinks also of the ever-shifting and much-debated meanings attributed to the biblical ideas of stewardship and dominion—which remain deeply implicated in our understanding of how or whether to respond to the threat of global climate change.<sup>6</sup> Or of the increasingly complex and confounding relationship between spirituality and consumerism.<sup>7</sup> And there is growing perception—whether it is entirely accurate or valid remains to be seen—that spirituality is in some arenas threatening to supplant religion altogether.<sup>8</sup> It is not really possible in the face of such grave issues to refuse the challenge of judgment or evaluation.

So, one of the questions before us is: to what extent can the critical study of spirituality contribute to the clarification of the meaning, authenticity, and value of spiritual experiences and practices that confront us from the near and distant past? We have gathered a group of distinguished scholars to help us think about this and other questions relating to the meaning and significance of spirituality as a field of study.

## NOTES

1. For two very different approaches to this question, see: Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999); Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Boston: Cowley, 1997). Further, more recent reflections on this question can be found in the section, "Theology and Spirituality," in Arthur Holder, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005), 175–285.
2. Ann Taves, "Detachment and Engagement in the Study of Lived Experience," *Spiritus* 3:2 (Fall, 2003): 186–208.
3. Several recent essays in *Spiritus* reflect this concern. See: Barbara Newman, "Rereading John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14," *Spiritus* 4:1 (Spring 2004): 84–90; Francis Kline, "Artistic Performance and Ascetic Practice," *Spiritus* 2:2 (Fall 2002): 173–179; and M. Shawn Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," *Spiritus* 2:1 (Spring 2002): 15–29.
4. This was one of the key arguments of Robert Orsi's recent essay, "2 + 2 = Five, or the Quest for a More Abundant Empiricism," *Spiritus* 6:1 (Spring 2006): 113–121.
5. See Elizabeth Castelli's recent essay on this question: "The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood: Using Early Christian Martyrs to Think With," *Spiritus* 6:1 (Spring 2006): 1–24.
6. The recent Bill Moyers documentary, "Is God Green," highlights the troubling, but still-evolving, connection between a particular theological-spiritual vision of stewardship and a particular political response to the threat of global climate change. See: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/green/index.html>.
7. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
8. See Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Karen Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005). Also: Sandra Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," *Spiritus* 3:2 (Fall 2003): 164–185.