

SPIRITUALITY

- Topic: The Discipline of Spirituality: Fundamental Issues
Convener: Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union
Moderator: Bruce H. Lescher, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Presenters: Michael Downey, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo
Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union
Diana Villegas, Acton, MA

The goal of this session was to stimulate a renewed conversation about the identity, object, and methods appropriate to work in the emerging academic discipline of Spirituality. The presentations were purposely kept short to leave ample time for discussion.

Michael Downey led off with a paper entitled "Bringing Methodological Form to the Study and Teaching of Spirituality." Drawing on a Josef Jungmann statement about "changes taking place somewhere behind the world of sensible appearances" that are "revealed in cultural and artistic forms," Downey discussed how the discipline of Spirituality studies the tensive interaction between human spirit and divine Spirit as it is concretely expressed within the forms of the sociosymbolic order. He identified seven focal points for such studies: (1) within a culture; (2) in relation to a tradition; (3) in light of contemporary events, hopes, sufferings and promises; (4) in remembrance of Jesus Christ; (5) in efforts to combine elements of action and contemplation; (6) with respect to charism and community; (7) as expressed and authenticated in praxis. Downey then employed this framework to explore in depth how the Cistercian monks of Mepkin Abbey developed an architectural design for their church that expressed the depths of their spirituality. Downey noted that this example demonstrates the method he uses in teaching Spirituality.

In "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," Mary Frohlich first described how the challenges of teaching have led to clarified insight into "lived spirituality" as both the concrete object and the factual activity of the discipline of Spirituality. Lived spirituality is an ongoing dynamic activity in which individuals and groups create and recreate meaning, joy, and shared life from whatever materials are at hand. The academic discipline of Spirituality is also an engagement in lived spirituality; hence scholars need to develop insight into its character as "spiritual discipline."

Having clarified the concrete object of the study of Spirituality, Frohlich then began to develop the claim that another, more theoretical move is also needed. She proposed reclaiming the term "interiority" as a way of naming what defines spirituality. Interiority is the capacity for intimate, in-depth communion; it underlies not only prayer, but also human love and group solidarity. The true character of interiority is the opposite of the individualism, elitism, or disembodiment that are currently being purged from traditions of spirituality. In conclusion, Frohlich

noted that Lonergan's development of the notion of interiority may have potential to move discussions of method for the discipline of Spirituality to a new level.

Diana Villegas then spoke on "What Does Spirituality Study? A Fresh Look," with particular interest in the claim that the scholar's engagement in the subject matter is part of the identity of the study of Spirituality. After a brief historical review demonstrating that engagement has traditionally been the stance of those who write on the spiritual life, Villegas took up the task of presenting an argument for its appropriateness. Philosopher of religion Robert Neville makes such an argument in relation to one of the major elements of religion, namely, imaginative structures and practices. These have an internal logic that he terms the "network meaning" and an experiential dimension that he terms the "content meaning." Neville asserts that most often the content meaning of religious practice cannot be known except through participation. Hence, in this case participatory knowledge is actually more "objective" than distanced knowledge. Villegas concluded that this is one way of substantiating the claim that the study of Spirituality requires disciplined, critical, but nevertheless genuine vulnerability to what one studies.

The lively discussion that followed focused mainly on the question of the self-implicating character of the academic discipline of Spirituality, particularly as it impacts teaching. Sandra Schneiders suggested that it is helpful to think of Spirituality as a "science of the individual" that does not have as its aim the kind of systematic generality that is proper to some other theological fields. A number of speakers affirmed that attention to personal experience is essential to teaching and studying in this field. Janet Ruffing noted that spiritual texts are more often than not performative, in the sense that their inbuilt intent is to evoke an engaged response from the reader. Asking students to articulate both the affective character and the intellectual content of their responses is a necessary starting point for teaching. Others countered, however, that today's students can too easily take their own experience as an unassailable norm; hence they need to learn that there are "canons" by which spiritual experiences are judged. Continuing discussion developed the insight that there are many different canons, and canons change over time. The challenge is to involve students in a process of critical reflection on experience, uncovering and assessing the various layers of interpretation and reinterpretation that are embedded therein.

In short, the session successfully initiated a renewed conversation on defining the academic discipline of Spirituality, yet left all knowing that there is much more work to be done.

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