

SPIRITUALITY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Spirituality
Convener: Patrick Kelly, S.J., Seattle University
Moderator: Simon Hendry, S.J., University of Detroit Mercy
Presenters: Tom McElligott, St. Mary's College
Jean-Pierre Fortin, Universite de Sherbrooke
Robert Lassalle-Klein, Holy Names University

Tom McElligott argued in his paper, “Spirituality and Theology: Who is on first? How does the discipline of spirituality fit into a theology conference?” that the subject matter of spirituality is the first-level reflection on experience that precedes theological inquiry. With reference to Clifford Geertz’ understanding of ‘thick description’ of human experience this paper demonstrated how the discipline of spirituality examines human experience to uncover the way material reality becomes a vehicle for the spiritual. McElligott discussed how the material reality of film and film making represents one such vehicle for the spiritual. He examined the film *Ida* by Pawel Pawlikowski and the dramatic experiences that changed *Ida*’s life, the director’s complex point of view and the filmmaking techniques that embodied it, and the way the film engaged the sense of the spiritual in its audience. The film presents the viewer with *Ida*’s pensive, reserved, and yet determined openness to the changes she faces in the experiences that unfold before her. Those self-transcending changes open her to new possibilities of life integration toward the ultimate value she holds. Human experience and unpacking its parameters is on first. What is on second requires the rest of the theological team.

In the second paper, “From Spiritual Theology to Theological Spirituality: A Dialogical Understanding of the Experience of God,” Jean Pierre Fortin discussed how recent attempts to define the object of and a suitable method for spirituality—such as Kees Waaijman’s and Sandra M. Schneiders’—invoke phenomenological and meta-cognitive approaches which prevent (rather than favor) engagement with lived experience. These approaches also move away from engagement with theology. He proposed, instead, to conceive spirituality as interpretive encounter and dialogue between the researcher’s and the studied subject’s experiences of inner transformation (or self-transcendence). The spirituality researcher gains access to other spiritual traditions by assuming her own spiritual localization and by reaching out to others’ lived experiences and traditions in their distinctiveness. This mutually enriching conversation itself constitutes the substance of theology, understood as “thinking involvement with God” (Philip Sheldrake).

Robert Lassalle-Klein suggested in his paper, “Free to ‘Get Real’ with Christian Spirituality Around the Globe,” that the time has come to reexamine the philosophical roots of phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches that play such an important role in the academic study of spirituality in Euro-American contexts. While these approaches have been fruitful in some ways, their roots in Western idealism and its debates with empiricism have imposed constraints that are being questioned, rejected, and/or superceded by important scholars working with populations on the margins of Euro-American centers of power and influence. Lassalle-Klein reexamined the philosophical roots of phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to the study of spirituality in light of the varieties of

Topic Session: Spirituality

Christian historical realism found in theologians living and/or working with communities outside the centers of influence and power. He highlighted the spiritual writings of Jon Sobrino as a representative case, showing how Sobrino uses Ignacio Ellacuría's philosophy of historical reality to appropriate and reconstruct the role of the hermeneutical circle and the phenomenological epoché in some of the leading Euro-American definitions of spirituality.

The discussion continued to address fundamental questions of the discipline of spirituality, with a focus on methodology. Fortin and Lassalle-Klein both critiqued current methodologies for studying spirituality that were informed by phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches. They did so, however, from very different vantage points. Fortin was concerned that the current methodologies move away from both lived experience and theology and he sought to meaningfully re-engage the work of European and North American theologians. Lassalle-Klein, on the other hand, was concerned about a reductive idealism in the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to the study of spirituality in Euro-American contexts, but that is present in Euro-American approaches to theology as well. He was encouraging Euro-American scholars of spirituality to make use of Ellacuría's notion of historical realism, which emphasizes the importance of the encounter with the poor and outcasts of history, in the development of their methodology.

Given the different critiques of current methodology in the study of spirituality that were offered, it is not surprising that one of the questions that was discussed and debated was "What is the significance of encounter with the poor and the outcasts of history for the encounter with God in Christian spirituality?"

PATRICK KELLY, S.J.
Seattle University
Seattle, Washington