

QUESTION

WHAT FACTORS OUGHT WE TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHEN DESCRIBING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

In its widest sense, spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one's action flows. This concept of spirituality is not restricted to any person who has a belief in the divine or transcendent, and fashions a lifestyle according to one's religious convictions. In this context one can speak of, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim spirituality as well as Christian spirituality. However, the comparative study of Christian and non-Christian spirituality belongs to the field of religious psychology rather than theology.

The concept of 'Christian spirituality' itself is more difficult to define than might be anticipated. For example, Gordon Wakefield describes it as the 'attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them reach out towards supersensible realities. Similarly, Paul Evdokimov speaks of it as 'the life of man facing his God, participation in the life of God: the spirit of man listening for the Spirit of God'. He explains further that 'the spiritual life in this more restricted sense is a supernatural life, and this seems to be in accord with biblical usage, where the word spiritus or pneuma refers to a divine power and therefore to the supernatural'.

More precisely is the definition of Christian spirituality according to Kenneth Leach, which says that spirituality is about a process of formation. In his explanation he emphasizes that, 'we are formed by, and in Christ, and so being transformed. Our goal through spirituality is to grow to maturity in Christ to become more Christ-like and share his nature.....Christian spirituality is a process in which Christ takes the initiative; it is a 'putting on' of Christ (Galatians 3:27) and so is the work of grace from start to finish'.

Spiritual formation therefore is not a gentle path, the acquisition and application of spiritual skills and techniques. It is a road which passes through storms and desert wastes, through fire and flood; a road traversed by monsters and demons; a road fraught with danger. The goal of our spirituality is Christian maturity. This is not the same as psychological maturity, adjustment, and the attainment of a balanced personality. It is a goal, which brings us into conflict with prevailing values and with much that passes for Christianity and for spirituality in our society. It is on this note that we can not describe spirituality without taking into account the factors that informed it.

The mystery of Holy Spirit is so complex and perfect that it can never be duplicated by an individual Christian or by a nation. It is a treasure that we share but never exhaust. The Holy Spirit moves in a variety of ways to lead individuals to perfection. Thus, we have different ways of describing Christian spirituality. The cause of diversity according to St. Thomas Aquinas is that God "dispenses his gifts of grace variously so that the beauty and perfection of the Church may result from these various degrees." St. Paul teaches the same doctrine: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favour bestowed on each of us" (Romans 12:4-6).

The supernatural life of grace respects the human personality and condition, and therefore the differences in Christian spirituality are rooted in the individuality of the human person and the particular characteristics of groups and nations. Thus, the temperament of individuals, the moral predisposition to virtue or vice, the type of character cultivated-all these factors exert a great influence on one's response to grace and the use one makes of it. These factors will also determine to a great extent one's aptitude or need for particular ascetical practices, devotions, and styles of prayer. They will likewise affect the choice of one's vocation or state in life, and that, in turn, introduces another set of factors that describes one's spirituality in view of vocational commitments and duties of state.

The Bible is the rule and standard of all authentic spirituality. When, therefore, Christians follow Christ in a way that appeals to other persons, or when they formulate a spiritual 'Doctrine or Theology' that can lead souls to greater perfection, they frequently attract followers who adopt the same pattern of Christian living. In time when theology is expressed in a corporate manner by the followers, this social manifestation emerges as a distinct way of describing spirituality, e.g., Benedictine spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Teresian spirituality, or Salesian spirituality.

Yet schools of spirituality are not restricted exclusively to individual persons as founders or leaders as mentioned above; a particular period on history (post-Reformation spirituality and Vatican II spirituality), or the doctrinal basis and content (Eucharistic spirituality and Marian spirituality), they may also be classified according to national temperament and culture (Italian spirituality and African spirituality). In contrast to the Italian Catholic's quiet manner of worship, many African Catholics are still practising spirituality clothed in African dress, because they came out of the tradition of ancestor worship, magic, ritual medicine, taboos and lousy religious celebrations.

Personal experience is an important factor when describing spirituality. By this I mean one's own religious experience, but I also include one's experience on the direction of others and the vicarious mystics. Nothing can replace personal experience in providing an understanding of the mysterious workings of the spiritual life. Thus, Congar asserts: "Charity, taste, and a certain personal experience of the things of God are necessary in order that the theologian may treat the mysteries and speak of them in a befitting manner." And St. Teresa of Avila stated: "Many are mistaken if they think they can learn to discern spirits without being spiritual themselves."

Going by the way of Gordon Wakefield definition of spirituality (attitudes and beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them reach out towards supersensible realities) we would understand that it is expected of spirituality to enhance racial and ethnic integration since the Gospel of Christ is just but one, therefore spirituality can be described in view of ethnic and racial integration. Kenneth Leach says that 'the goal of Christian spirituality brings us into conflict with the prevailing values in our society'. In a practical sense however, this assumption is not realistic.

When speaking of spirituality the very important virtues to be considered are those which informed the inner life most directly and are as it was its clearest and fullest expression. This is not to deny the influence of those factors enumerated above - the different surroundings in which a person lives, the different historical circumstances in which he may find himself, different vocations, each bound up with what are most unique in each personality-will, theology etc. However, human tradition is subject to error and likewise any of those other factors mentioned above. Therefore, in my own opinion, we ought to take into account as well, the indices by which we categorize particular people and their society - developed and underdeveloped nations.

These indices include (i) on the socio-economic level, widespread of poverty as we have in Africa. (ii) On the political level, the weakness of institutions, the existence of authoritarian governments, often highly repressive in character, the over-riding of human and social right as we presently have in Nigeria. (iii) On the religious level, the churches' dependence on those in the developed nations for resources or fund and personnel, and the proliferation of sects, in which those forsaken take refuge. All these affect the spirituality of the concerned people, and we cannot describe their spirituality in isolation of those accounts. It explains why we should see spirituality as a way of life rather than a theoretical exercise of academic study.