

2000

Christian Spirituality in a Postmodern Era

Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

Todd W. Hall

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McMinn, Mark R. and Hall, Todd W., "Christian Spirituality in a Postmodern Era" (2000). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 188.

http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/188

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN A POSTMODERN ERA

MARK R. MCMINN and TODD W. HALL

*Rosemead School of Psychology
Biola University*

The *Journal of Psychology and Theology* had its 25th birthday almost half a decade ago, and has become closely identified with the contemporary movement to integrate psychology and theology. This integration task has come with various intellectual challenges, including the challenge of valuing various ways of knowing. Psychology, deeply rooted in a scientific epistemology, places great value in systematic and measurable observations. Christian theology is bounded by central doctrines, forged over centuries of dialog and based on the authority of a sacred text. Those integrating psychology and theology most effectively have learned to value both epistemologies—the scientific and the authoritative—and have often been maligned and misunderstood in both worlds for valuing the epistemology of the other.

As difficult as the integration task has been, both theological and psychological ways of knowing are largely based on propositions, logic, and rationality (though one could easily find both psychologists and theologians who are eager to call one another illogical and irrational). In the modernism climate in which the contemporary integration movement was birthed, there has been great confidence in human rationality. Those doing integration have identified rational Christian tenets through solid, time-honored theological analysis and rational psychological tenets through empirical research. Progress has seemed slow, but the ground rules have been relatively clear.

Postmodernism, with its valuing of multiple ways of knowing, has ushered in new challenges for integration. The myth of viewing psychology as an objective, value-free science has been exposed (Jones, 1994), and rational approaches to under-

standing the Christian faith have been complemented with renewed interest in experiential means of Christian formation. No longer can we presume that the only common ground for integration is logic, propositions, and rationality. Now we must grapple with the human narrative—the experiential content of life. We have had the task of integrating psychology and theology. Now we are faced with the task of integrating psychology, theology, and spirituality.

Spirituality spans across both theology and psychology. Theologians have been writing and thinking about the spiritual life for centuries, but now psychologists are also interested in spirituality, as evidenced by a flurry of books on spirituality being published by the American Psychological Association (Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000; Shafranske, 1996). It is, at times, difficult to know what psychologists mean by spirituality, but it is heartening to know that it is finally an acceptable topic of conversation. Spirituality has become a sort of common currency, allowing Christian psychologists to transact in both Christian and psychological contexts. If the integration task has become more difficult with the postmodern emphasis on narrative, it has also become relevant to Christian living, and the opportunities for constructive dialog with mainstream psychology have expanded exponentially.

What began as one special issue on Christian spirituality has grown into two. This issue, the first of the two, is devoted to spiritual direction and spiritual formation. The second special issue, due to be published in the spring of 2001, will pertain to a variety of other relevant issues such as spiritual interventions, gender, measurement, and spiritual implications of various Christian theologies.

As we conceptualized these special issues, we recognized that it would be important to limit the domain of spirituality, and to position it in the context of the historic Christian faith, and thereby within the narrower concept of “religion.” As spirituality has become more popular in the broader field of

psychology, it has been increasingly contrasted with religion. A polarization has developed in which spirituality tends to be viewed as individually oriented and good, and religion tends to be viewed as institutional and bad (Pargament, 1999). Consistent with the individual orientation of spirituality, the concept has become rather amorphous and difficult to define in our postmodern context. Some would even argue that spirituality is defined by its lack of definition. For example, one popular measure of spirituality (Genia, 1997) includes the item, "I believe there is only one true faith." The item is reverse-scored, so that those who strongly agree with this item are deemed to be less spiritual than are those who strongly disagree.

This polarization and lack of clarity in defining spirituality and religion has led to recent work on defining spirituality and religion. Hill et al. (2000) developed definitional criteria for religion and spirituality that recognize their conceptual similarities and dissimilarities. According to Hill et al., spirituality is the broader of the two constructs because they both include a common criterion, whereas religion involves additional criteria not applicable to spirituality. They suggest that spirituality and religion necessarily include: "the subjective feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred. The term *search* refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform. The term *sacred* refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual" (Hill et al., 2000, p. 23).

An additional criterion can be applied to religion that would be necessary for the conceptualization of religion. The criterion states that for something to be considered religious, "the means and methods (e.g., rituals or prescribed behaviors) of the search receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people." This criterion represents the institutional element that is often associated with religion, and is the central factor in distinguishing religion from spirituality. Hall and Hill (2000) have offered an expanded criterion to differentiate spirituality from religion, one that involves explicitly shared norms and beliefs, validated from within an identifiable group involving three key components: (a) the nature of the sacred; (b) a normative notion of human development and maturity, and (c) the means, methods, or pathway of the search. These shared norms and beliefs provide the context for the search for the sacred.

A spirituality that is bounded by historic Christian theology defies a postmodern pluralism and asserts truth claims about the nature of God, normative notions of human development and maturity, and the methods involved in the search for God and spiritual growth. Thus, Christian spirituality necessarily falls within the narrower domain of "religion," as defined by Hill et al. (2000), and integrates the experiential epistemologies of both Christian and secular approaches to spirituality with the authoritative epistemology of propositional truth claims.

While being consistent with the mission of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, we have opted to focus this special issue on Christian spirituality. We hope our definition of "spirituality" here provides the reader with a clearer understanding of Christian spirituality within the broader context of religion and spirituality. We believe that Christian spirituality can contribute to the evangelical integration dialogue as well as the broader discussion of spirituality and religion, because of its insight into the nature of God, human development and maturity, and the means of spiritual change.

Christian spirituality existed long before modernist assumptions were questioned, and there is a rich historical heritage of spiritual formation that can be traced from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ all the way to the present day (Foster, 1998). This first special issue on Christian spirituality, therefore, looks back to the practices of spiritual formation that have defined and shaped Christians' experiences of faith over the centuries. Dallas Willard begins with a winsome invitation to consider our calling to be formed as spiritual beings in the image of Jesus Christ. Michael Mangis follows by responding to Willard's article by exploring how Willard's ideas apply to the life and work of a psychologist.

Though we have assembled this special issue within the boundaries of Christian spirituality, we have also attempted to find diversity within these boundaries. Douglas Hardy argues that understanding contemporary object relations theory can enhance the practice of spiritual direction. Laura Haynes provides a reaction to Hardy, placing relatively less confidence in psychological methods and greater emphasis on the authority of spiritual direction as a primary means of change and growth. Robert Watson provides an integration of contemporary object relations theory and spiritual direction, perhaps in a way that reflects the valuing of spiritual direction that Haynes calls for in her response

to Hardy. Both John Coe and Nicholas Howard (and his colleagues) have focused on St. John of the Cross, Coe providing an overview of John's developmental spirituality, and Howard et al. reporting findings on their survey of psychologists and spiritual directors regarding the values and beliefs found in John's spirituality.

In this special issue on Christian spirituality, and in the second part of this issue to follow, we hope to expand the possibilities for how integration is conceived. By considering a theology and psychology of spiritual formation, as occurs in the pages that follow, we intend to affirm both the familiar propositional epistemologies of psychology and theology and the experiential epistemology of spirituality. Without the former, spirituality becomes aimless and vulnerable to heresy and narcissistic drift. Without the latter, integration runs the risk of being sterile and largely irrelevant to the task of Christian spiritual formation.

REFERENCES

- Foster, R. J. (1998). *Streams of living water: Celebrating the great traditions of Christian faith*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.
- Genia, V. (1997). The Spiritual Experience Index: Revision and reformulation. *Review of Religious Research*, 38, 344-361.
- Hall, T. W., & Hill, P. C. (2000). *An expanded criteria for conceptualizing religion and spirituality*. Manuscript in preparation. Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University and Grove City College.
- Hill, P. C., Pargament, K. I., Hood, R. W., Jr., McCullough, M. E., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., & Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30, 51-77.

Jones, S. L. (1994). A constructive relationship for religion with the science and profession of psychology: Perhaps the boldest model yet. *American Psychologist*, 49, 184-199.

Miller, W. R. (Ed.). (1999). *Integrating spirituality into treatment: Resources for practitioners*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Pargament, K. I. (1999). The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 9, 3-16.

Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (1997). *A spiritual strategy for counseling and psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of psychotherapy and religious diversity*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Shafranske, E. P. (1996). *Religion and the clinical practice of psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

AUTHORS

McMINN, MARK R. *Address*: Wheaton College Department of Psychology, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Rech Professor of Psychology. *Degree*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, Vanderbilt University. *Specializations*: Cognitive therapy, professional ethics, church-psychology collaboration, integration of psychology and Christian spirituality.

HALL, TODD, W. *Address*: Rosemead School of Psychology, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639. *Titles*: Assistant Professor of Psychology; Director, Institute for Research on Psychology and Spirituality; Assistant Editor, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. *Degree*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, Rosemead School of Psychology. *Specializations*: Measurement of spirituality, clinical integration, longitudinal course of marriage.