New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12196

‘Spiritual But Nor Religious’ – Some Final Reflections

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Abstract

In the discourse of a number of theologians there is a perceived gap between spirituality and ‘theology proper’. This gap would not have been perceived or understood by Aquinas, Augustine or others of the long tradition of theological enquiry, since they saw union with God as the highest fruit of theological thinking. There is another gap today between the term ‘spirituality’ used in a loose and de-contextualized fashion by the Mind, Body, Spirit industry and those for whom its study is part of mystical theology and its practice part of the church’s *mystagogia.* The fact that many otherwise orthodox believers, as well as those alienated from regular church belief and practice, turn to more esoteric spiritual paths may be a sign that a return to a better-informed and theologically grounded knowledge of the mystical tradition is long overdue.

Keywords

Spirituality, Mysticism, Prayer, Holiness, Dualism

Within the culture of Normandy into which I was born, there is a gastronomic tradition called *le trou Normand.* Normans go in for lengthy meals of up to 10 courses, each one as rich and delicious as the last. When the diners have reached the gut-busting stage, but still have to find room for more, a small but fiery glass of Calvados is served, with the intention of burning a path that will ease the way through to final digestion. This paper will serve a rather similar function, being not so much a paper entirely in its own right, but one that picks up the central themes and topics of the excellent studies which have preceded it, and offers a way through to both a synthesis of and a reflection, in the light of our current cultural and theological context, on the central questions posed by the consideration of formation in holiness: virtue, growth and the spiritual life.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My own perspective on this comes as an academic theologian who has taught within the discipline of what used to be called mystical theology but who has also, for many years, been a pastoral practitioner, working among other pastoral practitioners in the field of spiritual direction. There is a certain tedium attached to hearing the refrain, 'I'm spiritual, but not religious'. The tedium comes not only because it is so often repeated, but because it appears to mean so very little, other than a residual inclination to vaguely 'spiritual' thoughts and feelings and a disinclination to contextualize such a tendency within the discipline either of theological propositions or of the practices attached to them when they underpin the life of a community which espouses them. As a theologian, my principal concern has been to ensure that what is taught to those seeking to apply the theory of critical theology to often uncritical spiritual practice has sufficient academic rigour to be both faithful to the tradition and effective in application. As a pastoral practitioner it has been my principal concern to ensure that a desire to keep the tradition critical, rigorous and pure does not get in the way of the Holy Spirit, who blows at will and does not scruple, when people give a spiritual inch, to take several miles.

What, then, is the context in which the majority of our fellow citizens appear to 'do' spirituality? It is certainly not that of formal religious belief and practice. Nevertheless Gordon Lynch, in the introduction to his book on new spirituality and progressive belief, cautions us that we should not make facile assumptions and jump to unsubstantiated conclusions about the disappearance of formal religion in those parts of the world where Christianity has been the dominant system of belief and religious practice.[1] There remains a remarkably high level of religious self-identification in the United States, for example, with between 40–45% of citizens claiming in polls to attend religious services on a regular basis. That said, an astonishingly high number of Americans, some of whom, at least, are in other ways orthodox believers or practitioners, claim also to believe in alien visitation and other paranormal phenomena, without apparently seeing any contradiction in this. By and large, however, if they engage in some sort of spiritual seeking, it tends to be within at least the vague contours of Christian beliefs or sources.

The situation is not so clear in other English-speaking societies in the developed world. The 2003 Social Attitudes Survey shows 43% of British people claiming to have no religion. This number rises to nearly 60% of those aged 18–34 while the English Church Attendance survey shows less than 8% of British people attending

[1] The following section owes a heavy debt to Gordon Lynch, *The New Spirituality: an Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century* (London, I.B.Tauris, 2007).

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church on a regular basis. If the faith community gathered together for worship is the principal *locus* for proclaiming and engaging with the Bible as the source of encounter with the living God, then this bodes ill for the spiritual health of these isles.

There is, however, no reliable evidence to suggest that a burgeoning of postmodern, experimental and new age spiritualities is threatening to overwhelm the more established traditions within Christianity, with a recent Anglican survey reported as claiming that more people in Britain attend church on a Sunday than football.[2] But it is no secret to anyone who has engaged with this question at close quarters that many spiritual seekers have found the fare offered to the faithful in terms of spiritual nourishment within normal parish structures woefully inadequate. The impoverished delivery of the literary, artistic and musical spiritual heritage of Christianity on offer in the majority of parishes has resulted in a *mystagogia* more honoured in the breach than in the observance. This has left many of the faithful reaching out beyond the borders of the Christian tradition into the more easily accessible realms of popular psychology, quantum physics and the mysticism of the East for the sustenance they have not found elsewhere. The fact that education at depth in the spiritual traditions of Christianity is so glaringly absent from the core curriculum of most priestly training may account for this. In the case of the Catholic Church it may also be that the modern concentration of notions of holiness on the sacraments and their almost exclusive delivery by a clerical caste has all but swept away from the minds of today's faithful the memory of a rich spiritual heritage that frequently came from sources among the laity. The fact that, despite all this, so many people remain resolute in their determination to lead lives of prayer, reflection and just action is a credit to them and to the fortitude that is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time as we consider this dissonance between faith practice and the Christian spiritual heritage, it is also the case that even among those claiming to be Christian in some sense, there is a level of inconsistency in the extent to which their faith influences their self-understanding and chosen lifestyle. A recent study of teenage religious and spiritual beliefs conducted by the National Study on Youth and Religion in North Carolina shows that the most common religious attitude among those studied could best be described as a moralistic, therapeutic deism. Put into words, a manifesto of such beliefs might be articulated as, 'There's someone watching over us, from whom we can get help when we're in trouble (but there's no point bothering about it otherwise). The purpose of life is for us to

[2] See http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8970031/The-return-to-religion.html referenced 1.9.2015.

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be happy, beautiful and natural and to be good to one another, and if we're good we'll go to Heaven when we die'.[3]

Linda Woodhead's research points to the blurring and dissolving of traditional religious boundaries across the board in Britain.[4] Studies present this as good news or bad news, depending on the starting-point of the researcher. Karl Rahner suggested that, 'The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic", one who has experienced "something", or he will cease to be anything at all'.[5] Although his analysis of what this turn to the mystical might consist of is sober in the extreme, it is at least an optimistic view. Other commentators view today's emergent spiritualities as a debased and bastardized derivation of the tradition, as the offer of exciting missiological opportunities or as the final assault upon western civilization by an all-powerful narcissistic, consumerist ideology. There are studies that come to all of these conclusions.[6]

What are the aspirations behind the often muddled and eclectic practices that pass muster for spirituality today? If we look at the language in which their practitioners describe them, we are not always greatly the wiser. Grand Gongmaster Don Conreaux claims, of the Gong Bath, 'The sound of the gong is the channel of Pure Truth, and whenever Truth is experienced, healing occurs. When the gong is played, the sound vibrations immediately quiet the mind, allowing healing to occur. The gong's resonance is the very music of the spheres; the heavenly bodies of the universe. Each planet, moon and star is a gong emanating the divine sound of AUM in its variety of vibrational patterns.'[7]

While such claims may engender scientific and theological scepticism, it is also important to ask ourselves what is being sought here, & why whatever it is has not been found in the more orthodox *loci* within the Christian spiritual tradition. We can make critiques of the cult of the body beautiful and the unmet need for peace and centredness within the frenetic pace of postmodern life, but we might also make critiques of the neo-platonic resonances within the tradition itself, and the lack of opportunity within it for people to learn to be at home within their own bodies and to find, through a sufficient variety of spiritual practices, the physical and spiritual serenity that they lack. The profound dualism that is both implicit and explicit in much

[3] G. Lynch, *The New Spirituality,* p.5.

[4] Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005) and Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto eds., *Religion and Change in Modern Britain,* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2012).

[5] Karl Rahner, 'Christian Living Formerly and Today', *Theological Investigations*, 7, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p.15.

[6] G. Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, p.7.

[7] See http://www.philresound.co.uk/page6.htm accessed 15 October 2015.

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of the surface language of the Christian spiritual tradition appears to put us at odds with our bodies. As interpreters of the tradition we have often fallen short of ways in which to explain asceticism as a liberation from physical idolatry rather than an incarceration into toxic patterns of self-hatred. If seekers are persistent in reaching out beyond the tradition it must to some extent be because they have not experienced within it an adequate conduit for life-giving encounters with the creator of their bodies and souls.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis urges all Christians,

> Everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.[8]

If those of us who teach Christian spirituality are to have any success with this, we will need to find adequate ways to convey the possibility and desirability of such encounters with people whose experience so far has often proved bewildering, sterile and disappointing. Philip Endean suggests that we need to spend time thinking about the distinction between the transformative grace of God, 'what matters most' and what we do to dispose ourselves to being receptive to God's transformative action.[9] 'What matters most' here is the quest to discover how we can become new creatures through the grace of God. This is often the question behind the New Age offers of mantra-chanting, gong baths and the like, even if it is not posed in a fashion that those familiar with the traditions of Christian spirituality find coherent. I suggest that, to any teacher of Christian spirituality, What Matters Most is to find a language that can not only help people to dispose themselves to be receptive to God's transformative action – that is often happening, in its own stumbling way – but also to recognize who it is that is acting and what to do once they have been acted upon. Endean further describes the central language of the Christian spiritual patrimony as one of paradox which hovers on the verge of contradiction. The tradition certainly offers transformative experiences that centre upon the mysteries of incarnation, kenosis and eschatology. At best we find within it ways not only to be at home in our own bodies and with those of others, but ways in which to recognize the incarnation of Emmanuel, God with us, in the most ordinary aspects of human living, including that of suffering and its consequences. It means developing the skills, according to Gerard Manley Hopkins, to '. . . greet him the days I meet him, and bless

[8] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* 3.

[9] See the opening paper in this collection: P. Endean, 'Theology and "What Matters Most": Distinctions, Connections and Confusions'.

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when I understand' and to recognize the Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his'.[10]

Rahner claims that people have a capacity to intuit this instinctively, and the Holy Spirit is manifest in their capacity at least sometimes to be dimly aware of the God-givenness of human experience. For him mysticism is grounded in the experience of grace, whether we name it such or not,

> In every human being (as a result of the nature of spirit and of the grace of the divine self – communication always offered to everyone) there is something like an anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being oriented to God, which is constitutive of the human person in his concrete makeup (of nature and grace), which can be repressed but not destroyed, which is "mystical" or (if you prefer a more cautious terminology) has its climax in what the classical masters called infused contemplation.[11]

Rahner's descriptions of these encounters are austere and tend towards the apophatic, but the dumb silence in which such awarenesses are often wrapped is not just a question of the mystical nature of the divine-human encounter. There is, for many people, a crucial lack of vocabulary with which to analyse them, or a rejection of a religious discourse that has proved alien and alienating. Awareness of the encounter and coherent, adequately contextualized interpretation of it can also be lost in the insistence of the consumer-driven side of the spirituality industry that it is possible to have it all and have it now. The lack of an eschatological perspective renders us slaves to the need for immediate fulfilment and makes the absence or apparent fleetingness of these encounters incomprehensible. The task for those who have a tradition at hand with which to articulate the nature of these encounters is to make the tradition available and accessible to an audience that often has few anchor holds by which adequate description and analysis becomes possible, as Rahner says,

> It must be made intelligible to people that they have an implicit but true knowledge of God perhaps not reflected upon and not verbalized – or better expressed: a genuine experience of God which is ultimately rooted in their spiritual existence, in their transcendentality, in their personality, or whatever you want to name it.[12]

[10] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Wreck of the* Deutschland and *As Kingfishers Catch Fire.*

[11] Karl Rahner, 'Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Church', in Albert Raffelt and Harvey D. Egan, eds., *The Great Church Year*, (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp.362–363.

[12] Paul Imhof, Harvey D. Egan and Hubert Biallowons eds., *Faith in a Wintry Season: Interviews and Conversations with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life, 1982–84*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p.115.

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Endean asserts that all we can best hope for in teasing out with people What Matters Most is hints followed by guesses. If this is so then the challenge to us is how to provide those hints most effectively. What I find is often radically lacking in the Mind, Body, Spirit discourse is any language of the encounter with the cross, other than the offering of techniques to avoid it, or to get over it as thoroughly as possible once encountered. Christian spirituality's refusal to deny reality and its insistence that Christ is present in the storm through whatever our 'wildworst best' may be is what distinguishes it so markedly from the narcissistic and self-referential tendencies within much of the modern spirituality industry. It is, I think, a surer way of learning, as Dr. Strangelove did, to 'stop worrying and love the bomb' than playing the Mongolian nose flute or having a Venus Gong Bath. It also deals effectively with the 'now but not yet' of Holy Saturday as it is lived out in our frequent experience of waiting for the small resurrections with which the Christian life is populated. Again Rahner points to this, on an undramatic scale, but one which still requires of us faith, hope and considerable courage when he claims that,

> wherever space is really left by parting, by death, by renunciation, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain such is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world – there God is.[13]

However religiously illiterate people may be, pastoral experience shows that they can often deal more easily with paradoxical formulas than with speculative puzzles. The solving of abstract puzzles is not what they are after. They can handle the paradoxes present within their own desires and aspirations, and those served up to them by life itself, once they have been liberated from the myth, peddled by postmodern consumerism, that every desire can be met by the all-powerful market. Many people know this instinctively, if not always consciously.

My own convictions, born both of faith and of experience, lead me to seek the source and answer to these paradoxes in the person of Jesus. In that sense praying in the Spirit does become a matter of learning to say, 'Abba, Father' as a cry of recognition in the face of human longing and the human capacity for wonder. This does not only depend, however, on people's capacity to guess at the presence of God within the elusive glimpses offered by daily life. I suspect that more people would be open to an understanding of holiness as priesthood if they were able to have a deeper understanding of the priestliness of the ordinary.[14] It is our insistence on the 'special'

[13] Karl Rahner, *Biblical Homilies*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p.77

[14] See F. Ryan, 'Holiness and Priesthood' in this collection.

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nature of holiness that has cut so many lay people off from the source of holiness within themselves and their own lived experience. An article written on spiritual direction in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* around 1911 gives us a chilling reminder of the way in which faith in the Holy Spirit at work within the lives of the ordinary faithful was eroded by a priestly hegemony that sought to control access to and interpretation of the means and fruits of holiness:

> In the technical sense of the term, spiritual direction is that function of the sacred ministry by which the Church guides the faithful to the attainment of eternal happiness.... The Church requires all her adult members to submit to such private direction, namely, in the Sacrament of Penance. For she entrusts to her priests in the confessional, not only the part of judge to absolve or retain the sins presently confessed, but also the part of a director of consciences. In the latter capacity he must instruct his penitents if ignorant of their duties, point out the wrong or the danger in their conduct, and suggest the proper means to be employed for amendment or improvement. The penitent, on his part, must submit to this guidance.[15]

There is more than a whiff here of what Henri de Lubac once described as the 'reign of terror' that was pervasive during the anti-Modernist crisis. The whole focus is on the dread of error and the need to control the minds and lives of the faithful. The article advocates spiritual direction as a requirement 'in the lives of Christians who aim at the attainment of perfection.... This striving after Christian perfection means the cultivation of certain virtues and watchfulness against faults and spiritual danger'. The article notes that 'All religious are obliged to do so by their profession', but makes the grudging concession that 'many of the faithful, married and unmarried, who live amidst worldly cares aspire to such perfection as is attainable in their states of life'. The spiritual dangers involved in disempowering the laity and disconnecting them from the sources of holiness within their ordinary lives were generally overlooked here. Insofar as the Second Vatican Council began its extended reflection on the meaning of the priesthood of all believers, it broke the stranglehold of the clerical and religious castes over the means of holiness, but my pastoral experience tells me that there is still a long way to go in convincing people of the holiness inherent within their lives. In a masterly article entitled 'Love and Attention' in Michael McGhee's *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life,* Janet Soskice points to the correlation made by Iris Murdoch between love, attention and the seeking of the divine. This has a moral and a psychological,

[15] Charles Coppens, 'Spiritual Direction' in *The CatholicEncyclopedia*, (New York, Robert Appleton Company), accessed 1 September 2015 from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/05024a.htm

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developmental focus, as Charles Taylor predicates in *Sources of the Self* when he says, 'Orientation to the good is not something we can engage in or abstain from at will, but a condition of being selves with an identity'.[16] Soskice points out that the 'disengaged' or 'disembodied' self, which seems to be the ideal advocated by certain parts of the Christian spiritual tradition, is not someone with whom most people, and especially most women, can connect, bound as they are by the vexatious and unremittingly incarnational tasks of daily living. She points to the hierarchy that is established in the received version of Christian holiness 'which privileges the detached life over that of affection and disruption' and which is 'aligned with the distinction . . . which contrasts the demands and turmoil of ordinary domestic life with . . . the life according to reason, the life of the philosopher . . . the lover of beauty'. She rejects such a paradigm for holiness, arguing instead for a profoundly embodied understanding of the spiritual when she says, 'Once allow our physical natures into the picture as a good, or at least as a necessity, and the vexations of ordinary life may appear in a different light'.

If we do this, we cease to have as our ideal the received view of the spiritual life as 'long periods of quiet, focused reflections, dark churches and dignified liturgies . . . time spent in contemplative prayer, guided or solitary retreats, and sometimes the painful wrestlings with God so beautifully portrayed by the Metaphysical poets'.

What we want instead, she insists, is 'a monk who finds God while cooking a meal while one child is clamouring for a drink, another needs a bottom wiped and a baby throws up over his shoulder'.[17]

I suspect, in fact, that most modern monks would find that quite quiet in contrast to some of the frenetic vexations with which they have to deal in the daily round of monastic life, and of course these contrasts are offered with a certain amount of irony. Dom Gregory Collins, abbot of the Dormition Monastery in Jerusalem, has said that there is plenty of that 'free for all mysticism' within the tradition of the Christian east, but if that is the case, it is part of the tradition that by and large has not permeated the wider public consciousness very effectively. Our failure, in that sense, to convince people of the sacramentality of the ordinary exemplifies the way in which we have not taken the incarnation seriously, and in which we continue to peddle a form of implicit Gnosticism that is often taken up by aspects of the Mind, Body Spirit industry which seeks in its own way to abstract us from the everyday into a peaceful haze of mindfulness

[16] Janet Martin Soskice, 'Love and Attention', in Michael McGhee, ed., *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.59-72, 59.

[17] Ibid, p. 68.

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where we line up our chakras to the accompaniment of whale music and planetary vibrations.

The alienation from the self that is engendered by much of modern life leads many people towards the language of soul-making and the wisdom of popular psychology. It is fascinating to see how the business world has taken up the language both of psychology and of spirituality, so we can now buy books and attend seminars on the Seven Spiritual Steps to Successful Living, or being Highly Effective or whatever the goal is. It would appear that it pays to be Emotionally Intelligent and Spiritually Attuned. Peter Tyler reminds us of how the divorce in the world of psychology between the language of spirituality and the attempt to present psychology as a purely scientific and objective discipline has falsified the work of some of its greatest figures. He welcomes the recent return of soul-language to psychotherapy as a return to the roots of the field as found in the work of Freud and Jung, which enables proximity to certain discussions within theology. At the same time as appreciating this retrieval of soul-language, Tyler critiques the dualism that he perceives can creep in with such language. He does not see philosophy, psychotherapy and spirituality as being incompatible disciplines, noting that Wittgenstein, in his attempt to introduce a therapeutic agenda that goes beyond the purely philosophical, encouraged his readers 'to "work on themselves" through the development of the *Übersichtliche Blick* [in] a discourse that moves from thinking to seeing to acting'. His ultimate aim 'stays deeply wedded to the ancient quest to root philosophy in wonderment. In this respect . . . we can see his philosophy as much as therapy as pedagogy – a true working on the soul'.[18] That 'working on the soul' is not just an optional activity for the leisured classes, it is the essential condition for a life lived coherently. The challenge is to find sources within the tradition which enable people to do that work in a way that is consistent with the aspirations of many who find modern life soulless. This is a question with which those of us who work at the coal face of spirituality have to wrestle endlessly.

In differing ways the writers cited up until now are addressing the same challenge. How do we 'find God in all things', as the Ignatian tradition has it, and how do we frame the spiritual life for the understanding of the non-specialist? Caryll Houselander points to the deeply kenotic process involved in the search for truth. Both Tyler and Collins question any discourse that speaks of a need to separate the true from the false self. I think they are right to do so if this leads us to a sort of neo-platonic disembodiment or to an unhelpfully binary view in which there is a clearly delineated 'true' self at war

[18] See Peter Tyler blog http://insoulpursuit.blogspot.co.uk/2015_08_01_archive.html

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with the equally clearly delineated 'false' one. But in a very direct way, Houselander points to the devastating challenge involved in a turn to simplicity:

> To accept oneself as one is; to accept life as it is: these are the two basic elements of childhood's simplicity and humility. But it is one thing to say this and another to do it. What is involved? First of all, it involves the abandoning of all unreality in ourselves. But even granted that we have the courage to face ourselves and to root out every trace of pretence, how shall we then tolerate the emptiness, the insignificance that we built up our elaborate pretence to cover?[19]

The incarnation demands that we take seriously the hermeneutical value of the questions posed and concerns raised by those seeking an understanding of the human project within or alongside the deposit and practices of faith. If they have found the tradition incomprehensible and alienating it is not always the fault of the people themselves or indeed of the tradition. It points, I suspect, to a poverty in our hermeneutical articulation of what lies at its heart. Teaching people how to read texts, whether from the Bible or elsewhere in the depository of the Christian spiritual tradition, is an urgent task, but one with which, as theologians, we must engage effectively ourselves if we are to be of use to others. We must also take seriously the contextualization of theology and the spiritual tradition within the particularities of a given language, history and culture. In this way we will gain a greater insight into the way that the ordinary Christian faithful have a theological sense that cannot be ignored. I believe that this is true also of those who are not Christian, or for whom the framework of Christianity is only a dim echo of a cultural past. Their quests and their questions are to be taken seriously, however incoherently they may be encapsulated. If Pope Francis is right in attributing a prophetic role to theologians then the heart of that prophecy lies within the context of a world that appears to find it increasingly easy to dispense with God and increasingly difficult to believe in anything beyond itself. This can only contribute to a rift both in personal and in social identities.

If the language of mystical encounter and incarnational spirituality has proved a minefield of contradiction to many, then that of kenosis and asceticism has proved beyond comprehension altogether or has been seen as mad, bad and dangerous. Maximus the Confessor advocates the self-divestment of misdirected passions or disordered desire. This is strongly reminiscent of the opening annotation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, who introduces them as,

[19] See Caryll Houselander, *The Passion of the Infant Christ*, (Sheed and Ward, London, 1949), pp.73-88.

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> Every way of examining one's conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions . . . every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life.[20]

Maximus and Ignatius both seek to harness the natural, God-given energies of the soul in order to help it move in the right direction, away from distraction, fragmentation and the practical idolatry of conferring infinite value on limited goods. In this they follow the Christian ascetic tradition of the purification of the passions and the re-education of the will according to the pattern of Holy One. In this sense Christian asceticism is experienced as a liberation rather than as a self-mutilation, assisting at the birth of one's fullest self which emerges under grace, received as a gift from God. This finds echoes in the teaching of Augustine, who had his own struggles with mind/body dualism, but who came to an understanding that human beings are called to live in their inmost region, that space which God himself has chosen as a dwelling.

What difference is there between this and the various ascetical practices to be found in the Mind Body Spirit industry? Fairness requires one to admire the dedication of practitioners within this bracket and to acknowledge the quest for truth and right living that often lies within them. The difference does not always lie in the extent of dedication, and indeed, vague nods in the direction of fasting from meat on Fridays or giving up alcohol for Lent pale into insignificance in the face of some non-religious practices of spiritual discipline. The ultimate difference, I think, lies in the goal. There is a world of difference between seeking, through ascetical discipline, to have a measure of control over one's body and mind and seeking to share in the very life of the Trinity. This is done through ascetical practices *per se* but also through the relentless daily discipline of submitting oneself and one's life to the challenge of scripture. Mark Barrett reminds us in an earlier paper of the contemporary dilemma in learning how to be formed in the reading of scripture. Through varying forms of *lectio divina,* the Word of God is experienced as that into which we are inserted, and which, through that insertion, allows us to discover what is happening within our subjective experience. The key is learning how to read our own experience as authoritative text, without turning our own purposes into an over-arching sovereign endeavour, or replacing the authority of scripture with the authority of the dominant self. If we need to be scripturally literate in our understanding of the skills of basic exegesis, we also need to learn how to apply an exegesis of our own life as revealed and reflected within the Word of God. Neglect of the historical context of Scripture

[20] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, #1.

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is neglect of the incarnation, but so is neglect of our own lived reality, discovered and revealed by the 'alive and active' Word. If the Word of God is truly alive and active, then, as Barth claims, it is active, albeit veiled, within secular reality. The texts of the Bible become texts that both reveal our reality and shape our sensibility. The test of whether or not our experience of encounter with God is authentic lies in a biblically enlightened consciousness that leads eventually to the transformed & transformative life. In contrast, then, to some of the aims and sources of the spirituality industry, the self can never be either the ultimate horizon or the owner of its own experience. All comes from God and is inexorably oriented towards God.[21]

In the end I return to my fundamental critique of the Mind Body Spirit industry as the expression of a culture built by and for those who have everything they need yet remain hungering and unsatisfied. The answer to 'What do you give someone who has everything?' must be 'nothing', not in the sense of not giving them anything, but not giving them the fulfilment of desire so much as more desire. In that sense we have neither a notion of ridding ourselves of desire altogether or an aspiration to have all our desires, physical and transcendent, met by varying techniques of spiritual and physical accomplishment. What is on offer here, within the Christian spiritual tradition is not *le trou Normand* in the midst of a gluttonous *smorgasbord* of decontextualized spiritual canapés but the paradox of a hunger which is, in a sense, nourishment itself. It is the development and nourishment of that desire that is at the heart of the mystical tradition, as the writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* concludes at the end of his evocative work:

> Because it is not what you are nor what you have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.[22]

I leave the final word to St. Augustine, the patron saint of desire, who writes, 'The whole life of a good Christian is holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled.... This is our life, to be exercised by desire.'[23]

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[21] This section is a reflection on and conversation with a paper given at the conference on textual reading given by Dr. Mark Barrett OSB.

[22] James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, (SPCK, London, 1981), LXXV, p.265.

[23] Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, IV, 6.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12196 Published online by Cambridge University Press