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THE PRAXIS OF SPIRITUALITY

Experiencing God and Responding to that Relationship

As we reflect on the development of the field of Christian spirituality over the last twenty-five years, corresponding to the life of the journal we are celebrating, *Studies in Spirituality*, methodological and definitional questions, philosophical questions, theological questions, and interdisciplinary contributions to our field remain in flux. We have witnessed a weakening of an assumed relationship between practicing a religion and spirituality in the West. And we have experienced an exponential growth in a variety of empirical approaches to the study of spirituality in psychology, business, neuroscience, health, and other social science approaches. It is timely that we ask whither our field is going?

In my reflections with you, I offer some preliminary remarks about the praxis of spirituality. Why do we engage in practices that facilitate deepening our experience of God and then shaping our basic relational life commitments, ministries, work, social and cultural life in response to this self-revealing God whose face is turned toward us as unconditional love and mercy?

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, our most fundamental religious experience is that of a self-revealing, self-gifting God who embraces us and invites us into relationship with Godself. Interestingly, some neuroscience studies acknowledge that it is characteristic of us as humans that we are made, or have evolved over millennia, in such a way that we can 'perceive and experience' God rather than that we 'believe in and produce God'.[1] In other words, religious belief and experience of God are not fictions of our imagination or merely creations of our neurological circuits. Rather it is the experience of our own human consciousness which enables us to reflect on the mystery of our very being and for that matter, the being of anything at all that opens us to the mystery of that which we name God. Philosopher and theologian, David Bentley Hart argues vigorously against the materialists that it is precisely such self-reflection on being and on our self-reflective consciousness that enables us

[1] Alexander A. Fingelkurts & Andrew A. Fingelkurts, 'Is our brain hardwired to produce God, or is our brain hardwired to perceive God: A systematic review on the role of the brain in mediating religious experience', in: *Cognitive Processing* 10 (2009) no.4, 293-326. Accessed on-line October 10, 2015.

to recognize and realize that God is the ultimate reality we seek and respond to that God.[2] Such introspection and self-awareness often leads us to experiences of 'bliss', either an experience of our own self-transcendence or an experience of God.

Canadian David Perrin describes spirituality as being inherent within human persons whether or not they are also explicitly religious. He says:

> Spirituality stands at the junction where the deepest concerns of humanity, and the belief in transcendental values, come together in the movement toward ultimate fulfillment in life. The spiritual center is the deepest center of the person: the place of surrender to authenticity and love. It is here that human beings are open to the transcendent, whatever that is for the individual. It is here that human beings experience ultimate reality and their most profound desires are satisfied.[3]

Spirituality expresses the most significant values of human life. Those values are expressed in practices – ways of acting, believing, feeling, thinking, and choosing. Consciously or not, each person constructs a spirituality that embodies the purpose and meaning of his or her life.[4]

When we propose to study spirituality, we are explicitly examining such embodied practices, attitudes, decisions – all of which are expressions of beliefs about the human or about our espoused religious beliefs. Spirituality is never exclusively about experiences of God or of transcendence but is also an activity of meaning-making based on those experiences or aspirations.

Experience of God and Meaning-Making

Experience is not necessarily a self-evident category. We never fully have access to experience directly, since it seems impossible for us to be experiencing and narrating the key aspects of that experience to ourselves simultaneously.[5] This meaning-making, in the form of narrative description, creates some kind of temporal sequencing and description about what happened. Gradually, the narrative expresses some kind of meaning or significance of an experience, whether

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[2] David Bentley Hart, *The experience of God: Being, consciousness, bliss*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

[3] David B. Perrin, Studying Christian spirituality, NewYork: Routledge, 2007, 22.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] See David Yamane, 'Narrative and religious experience', in: *Sociology of Religion* 61 (2000) no.2, 171-190; and Janet Ruffing, *To tell the sacred tale: Narrative and spiritual direction*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010, especially Chapter 3.

or not this process is purely interior to the person alone or told to another. Telling the story often elicits greater awareness about the experience and its significance.

Our experiences and their meaningfulness to us change and develop over time. Some themes become more prominent; others fade into lesser significance, or even disappear. This is an on-going internal process. We distill experience and appropriate it through linguistic description, interpretation, and reflection upon its significance. We then change behaviors and practices on the basis of this interpretation, and develop new insights or meanings that may subsequently emerge. A key experience often subtly changes significance over time in the light of subsequent learnings and 'new experiences'[6] that expand the possibilities of interpretation of prior experience. Such reflection results in growth in self-knowledge, changes in personal beliefs and practices, and the ability to relate our experiences to new contexts of interpretation that become available to us. Such meaning-making also depends on our available explanatory schemas: theology, mystical theory, Scripture or cultural systems of thought of one kind or another.

I am using at this point, the language of religious experience rather than that of mystical experience because most empirical studies of spiritual praxis use the language of religious experience since it is denominationally free and avoids the early 20th century Roman Catholic debates about mystical experience. Survey questions can be formulated apart from specific belief systems.

Jesuit, Karl Rahner wrote an essay, 'Reflections on the Experience of Grace'.[7] There he described potential places in our experience where God's Spirit is at work in us and others in which we experience our own self-transcendence. At the time, he was trying to circumvent the debates about whether 'mystical experience' was for the many or the few. He consistently pointed to a widely shared experiential dimension of Christian experience – that as Christians it is possible to have more than an abstract, notional relationship with God. He was on the side of the many. He wrote about the patently mystical in a monograph published under the title *Visions and Prophecies* in 1963[8] during the first session of Vatican II to justify the prophetic element in the church through experience of God.

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6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, New York: Crossroad, 1989, 320-322.

7 Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the experience of grace', in: Idem, *Theological investigations*. Vol. 3: *Theology of the spiritual life*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967, 86-90.

8 Karl Rahner, *Visions and prophecies*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1963.

Importance of Mysticism and Mystical Texts in Practicing Spirituality

Nevertheless, mystical experience or mysticism remains a significant and central focus of spirituality in our field of study. We have an astounding number of texts available in multiple languages today that inform our study and offer a wide variety of ways of describing Christian mysticism. These texts encourage mystical development in those who read them. They are intended to be performative texts, guiding their readers to new experiences of the holy or confirming experiences they have already had, encouraging continued growth. These texts also allow us to engage in comparative mystical studies, and they offer a variety of ways of describing the unfolding of the mystical path over time. Bernard McGinn has gifted us with his clarifying definition of mysticism 'as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God'.[9] As a process or a way of life, its goal is 'a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for that encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical'.[10] This second understanding differentiates mysticism from the broadly documented contemporary reports of religious experiences in a variety of sociological and psychological studies[11] of a single or a handful of instances of an experience of God or of transcendence in a person, from those, who after such experiences of the presence of God, shape their lives around this encounter with God in an on-going way. And finally, after studying an amazing array of mystical texts, McGinn determined that 'the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God'.[12] Hence McGinn replaces a number of goals of the mystical life expressed in metaphors such as 'union', 'the vision of God', and 'contemplation', among others, with the more universal experience of the 'consciousness of direct presence of God'.[13] In addition, these understandings

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9 Bernard McGinn, 'General introduction' to *The foundations of mysticism: Origins to the fifth century*, (*The presence of God: A history of Christian mysticism*, Vol. 1) New York: Crossroad, 1991, xv-xvi.

10 Ibid., xvi.

11 For an excellent summary paper on these studies, see: Michael Argyle, 'The psychological perspective on religious experience', RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 8, 1-20. Second Edition, October, 2009. Religious Experience Research Centre, RERC-008-2-016. PDF. Creative Commons. Accessed on March 24, 2016.

12 McGinn, 'General introduction', xvi.

13 Ibid., xiv.

of mysticism emphasize commitment to an on-going process in the life of the mystic who responds to this solicitation from God to grow in a sustained relationship. Finally, he refuses to separate mystical theology from this experience of the presence of God. He says, 'Mystical theory (theology) in most cases precedes and guides the mystic's whole way of life'.[14]

Religious Experience

I fully espouse the importance of mysticism and the frequency with which some clearly experience the presence of God. Yet mysticism as a term remains daunting and problematic for many people at the beginning of their personal experience of God. Religious experience seems to be a less problematic and a more accessible way of describing such experience for many people although it often marks the beginning of a mystical journey in McGinn's terms.[15] My work in the field of spirituality has largely been shaped by trying to understand my own experience of God and that of the many individual people I have seen for spiritual direction and an even larger number, who wanted to become spiritual directors. This particular 'spirituality practice' in the U.S. was reframed by the Center for Spiritual Development in Cambridge, MA, as helping directees notice and respond to their unique religious experience.[16] This means noticing the subtle interior movements that signal the presence of God in directees' lives and helping them respond to their increasing involvement with God and to overcome their resistance to a God who draws close to them. In the very small qualitative research study on mediations of religious experience I did many years ago, it was clear in that sample of directees that, when religious experience occurred in complex situations, they often needed to talk about the experience in some detail or write about it in a journal before they could recognize and then respond more specifically to the experience of God that was integral to the whole complex experience that took place outside of a dedicated prayer time.[17] Although entirely consistent with Ignatian discernment of spirits, this religious experience approach to spiritual direction no longer prescribed a standard menu

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[14] Ibidem.

[15] As recently, as April 17, 2016, *Religion and Ethics News Weekly* on Public Television, WNET, reported that 'one in two Americans report significant mystical experience that changes their lives. This statistic has doubled in twenty years'. So apparently the language of mysticism is making a come-back in some circles.

[16] William A. Barry & William J. Connolly, *The practice of spiritual direction*, San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1986.

[17] Janet. K. Ruffing, 'The world transfigured: Kataphatic religious experience', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995), 232-259.

of ascetical practices to foster such experience, but listens for and responds to the actual religious experience of the directees. Directors supported their noticing and responding to the leadings of God's Spirit. Practices that might support this growth were then recommended as deemed appropriate or useful. In the study cited above, respondents also demonstrated a wide variety of intentional practices that fostered this deepening awareness to God's presence and activity in their everyday lives.

One can argue that this approach to spiritual practice has as its starting point, the recognition that God is already involved with us, explicitly recognized or not, and solicits a response from us within our personal experience. Once an experienced guide recognizes where or how this is happening in a directee, the guide supports the directee with appropriate suggestions for additional practices that may help to deepen his or her relationship with God under the sway of God's Spirit.

Theological Understandings of Religious Experience

There is, of course, a theology of grace and a theology of revelation that undergirds this approach to spiritual practice. A spirituality and the range of its practices that are embedded within a religion are rich resources that support its unfolding. Notably, Karl Rahner's systematic theology is essentially a mystical theology. We humans are 'hearers of the Word', addressed by God. We can experience God's Spirit within our everyday lives if we notice it and become attuned to it. Since Rahner, many others have developed his insights in ways that are more accessible and which account for a much wider spectrum of experiences of God, not necessarily recognized and associated with liturgical and personal prayer or noted in mystical texts.

Australian Dominican, Denis Edwards, drew heavily on Rahner's work but on others as well in his volume, *Human Experience of God.* He describes theologically how human persons relate to God through pre-conceptual experience of God. He thus protects 'God as mystery' yet shows God is also moving toward human persons in real relationship with them. Edwards points to the mystery dimension of human life, the experience of grace drawn from Rahner, as well as how Jesus experienced God, and how we, too, experience God in the light of Christian faith. Edwards moves beyond Rahner to describe the social structure of the experience of God and then deals with explicitly mystical experience of God and finding God's will through discernment.[18]

[18] See also, William Reiser, *Seeking God in all things: Theology and spiritual direction*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, who emphasizes a theology of revelation underlying the

It matters, it seems to me, whether we practice spirituality within a larger, coherent, theological, spiritual, religious, or philosophical world-view that informs our practices and helps us interpret their results or conversely we simply engage in practicing spirituality apart from any particular religious or philosophical perspective. It is tempting to many to identify as being spiritual but not religious today in the U.S. And there are innumerable opportunities for spiritual development and growth in the spirituality marketplace. But without actually practicing a religion or embracing the system of belief and experience in which a spiritual practice is rooted, an enormous amount of wisdom and guidance is simply lost, and many of the understandings of a practice embedded in a larger, more complex teaching, simply disappears.

Spiritual Practices and Exercises

In this context, practicing spirituality can mean many things. Process theologian, Francis Baur describes 'the spiritual person as one who is interested in and dedicated to the artful handling of the world, the artful shaping of one's own self, and the artful forming of one's life into something beautiful'.[19] This is his definition of asceticism in the light of process theology. Karl Rahner said, 'The spiritual life is grace precisely because it must be painstakingly cultivated day by day (…) It is also work, planned exercise and conscious development of the believing, hoping, and loving life…'.[20] Theologian and therapist, Kathleen Fischer described the marks of 'A New Asceticism' in this ecological age as these:

> 1 – An ecological spirituality roots asceticism in love of the body and creation, thus correcting an association of asceticism as body-denying; 2 – Christian asceticism readies us for transfiguration by the Spirit; 3 – Ascetic practices are not ends in themselves but a means to embodying the reign of God and to free us for love and work; 4 – Community provides balance and support for asceticism and for personal and communal growth; 5 – And finally, both renunciation and celebration characterize the rhythm of Christian existence.[21]

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practice of spiritual direction as well as an apologetic for a strong Christological focus rather than the broader religious experience model. It is very complementary to Edwards approach.

[19] Francis Baur, *Life in abundance*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983, 256.

[20] Karl Rahner, *The practice of faith: A handbook of contemporary spirituality*, New York: Crossroad, 1984. 'Asceticism', 236.

[21] Kathleen Fischer, *Loving creation: Christian spirituality, earth-centered and just*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009, 136-151.

All of these theologically informed descriptions of spiritual practices place them within ever new contexts – an evolving universe and the suasiveness of love, love of God and love of neighbor as requiring conscious effort, and new insights about our relationship to our bodies and ecological challenges.

Historical theologian Margaret Miles says that spiritual practices support life-enhancing goals and help us to recognize and work against or resist that which is harmful to us. Self-Enhancing Goals might include: practices that lead to greater self-understanding, or exploring the edges of the psyche or of consciousness. These include spiritual direction, journaling, dream work, meditation, solitude silence, therapy, etc. These types of practices work against unconscious patterns of attraction or repulsion. She names other practices that help us control the addictive and deadening agendas of sex, power, possessions which religious vows target, but which are temptations in every life-style. These practices work against cultural conditioning, apparent needs, attachments, and limits. She describes other practices as gathering and focusing energy away from excessive care of the body or away from its neglect. These kinds of processes work against distraction, entertainment, cultural conditioning, and dissipation of energy. And finally, Miles advocates life-enhancing goals that include intensification and concentration of consciousness enabling one to become freer for love and work and to resist a focus that is not on God or the values we espouse. These might include personal and communal prayer, worship, cultivation of virtues, and sacramental life.[22]

Today, we live in cultures of 'systemic distraction', and many have developed an addiction to our all-pervasive technologies, especially smart phones. With settings that announce the arrival of messages, posts, and emails, many report checking their phones every ten minutes or oftener. This constant notification disrupts concentration, reinforces mind wandering instead, and the over reliance on digital communication now results for many in losing the ability to converse with one another and relate to the persons in our presence.[23] Relationship to one's body has become less negative and destructive and shifted

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[22] Margaret Miles, 'Four types of Christian asceticism', in: Idem, *Fullness of life: Historical foundations for a new asceticism*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1981, 135-154.

[23] See Jacob Weisberg's essay in *The New York Review of Books*, 'We are hopelessly hooked' which reviews the work of Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, and *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, as well as Joseph M. Reagle Jr., *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*, and Nir Eyal with Ryan Hoover's *Hooked: How to Build Habit-forming Products*, February 26, 2016, 6-9. Weisberg discusses major negative social changes resulting from the appearance of smart phones in 2007. These changes are sufficiently dehumanizing and threatening to our capacity to maintain robust relational lives that antidotes might well figure in our choices of practices supporting love of God and love of neighbor.

to a healthier and more holsitic relationship that includes ecological and interpersonal practices. The life of our planet depends on our developing new shared practices that build such communal and interpersonal relationships.

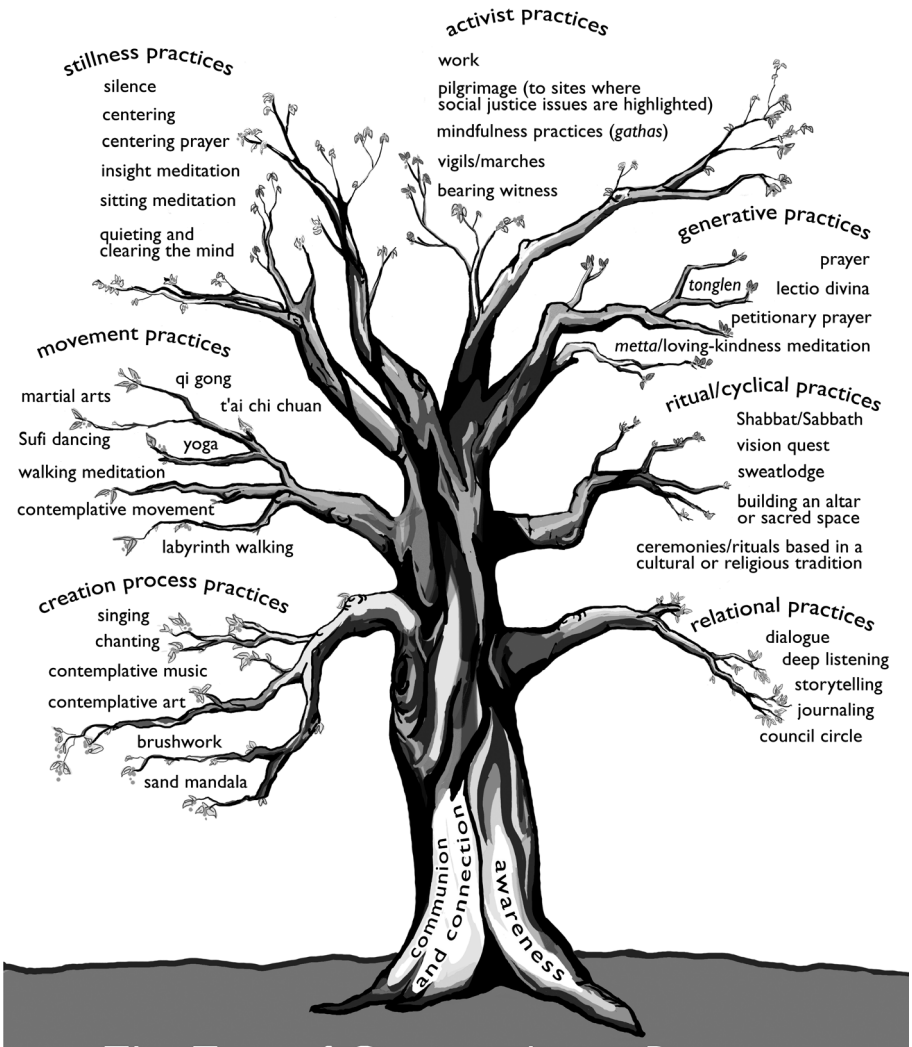
The critical approaches to spiritual practices described above offer new ways of understanding traditional ascetical practices, both their penitential elements as well as the way they foster a deeper and on-going relationship with God as well as life in community. This new asceticism includes healthier bodily habits, ways of thinking about what works against spiritual and interpersonal growth, and communitarian or social justice practices that foster the common good, including the preservation of the one planet we all share.

These reflective ways of choosing and experimenting with a variety of practices explicitly support deepening our relationship with God, growth in discipleship, relationships with our near beloveds and service of our neighbors near and far. Contrast this framework with the approach to spiritual practices portrayed in this attractive and appealing 'Tree of Practices', or menu of choices. This is one representation of spirituality practices, collected from many traditions but completely deracinated from them. The descriptors are appealing as are the activities themselves. But unlike the approach of the four theologians cited above, there is no conceptual context supplied that might offer guidance about how to use this menu in the service of growth in one's spiritual life, focused on a real relationship with God and related to an extended network of care and concern beyond oneself.

This tree of practices, organized apart from any framework or goals beyond highly individualistic ones, offers no guidance about how plucking a practice from the tree might support any particular group of goals or fulfill desires in relationship to spiritual growth. Yet it remains part of our field to be cognizant of such developments and reflect on their usefulness despite their limitations. Likewise, how do we draw on social science research to inform our reflection and teaching about practicing spirituality, religious or otherwise. I offer a few examples.

Learning from Other Disciplines Related to our Field

In a 2013 'Religion Trends', Pew Survey interpreted by Gregory Smith, information on the frequency of prayer is noteworthy for both the religiously affiliated and the 'nones' (those who claim no religious affiliation). 27% of the 'nones' report a practice of daily prayer and 24% weekly prayer. 21% of the unaffiliated (those who rarely attend church) report a practice of daily prayer and another 20% pray weekly. Among the religiously affiliated, 66% report daily prayer and 22% weekly prayer. Those who claim no religious



the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
www.contemplativemind.org

affiliation (the nones) practice prayer more than those who are unaffiliated. The same poll also revealed the practice of daily prayer increases with age. 72% of those born before 1928 pray daily as do 68% of those born between 1928and 1945. 64% of those born between 1946 and 1964 pray daily as do 58% of those born between 1965 and 1980. And even among our millennials, those born between 1991 and 1994, 43% pray daily. Ironically, although the frequency of prayer increases with age, religious affiliation does not. The study authors hypothesize this increase in prayer activity may be influenced by increasing adverse experiences in life and facing mortality.[24]

In a 2010 US News-Beliefnet report (9/6/2010), two other statistics in the US context seem important for our consideration. 79% of Christians in the survey indicated they pray at home, and only 4.4% in a house of worship. In addition, in an earlier study, the most important reasons for prayer for Christians were intimacy with God, 41.9%; followed by seeking God's guidance 28.7%; and thanking God, 20.3%.[25] These responses suggest that there is a hunger for a personal relationship with God and deep interest in prayer practices that facilitate a life of personal prayer. For the most part, this prayer is taking place at home although other sites were noted with much less frequency.

Empirical studies in the field of spirituality have multiplied exponentially since the early 1960's on altered states of consciousness which often focused on ingesting substances of one kind or another to facilitate a trance state or altered state of consciousness. These kinds of studies have expanded to include other cultural processes for inducing trance states that include ritual movement, sounds, choreographed sequences that aim at contact with the Absolute and when reinforced by modern civilization are very powerful in their effects. For example, some ritual processes today, according to Goffredo Bartocci,

> prepare for a 'serene' transcendence, in order to produce one's internal emptiness and finally to become convinced that vacuity and death are the coherent annihilation of oneself. The individual, though still seemingly part of the external everyday world, enters a different dimension and is ready to search for martyrdom in the Colosseum or to become an urban hero, a martyr, by blowing himself up in a café or at a bus stop like a modern-day kamikaze. Social reinforcement has thus facilitated the extreme process of detachment up to the point of facilitating a kind of group EGO Ideal.[26]

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[24] www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/event-transcript religion-trends-in-the-US/.

[25] www.beliefnet.com/faiths/faith-tools/meditation/2004/12-US-News-Beliefnet-Prayer-Survey.ASP, www/beliefnet.com/faith-tools/prayerplace/9/6/2010.

[26] Goffredo Bartocci, 'Transcendence techniques and psychobiological mechanisms underlying religious experiences', in: *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 7 (2004) no.2, 171-181, citation at 179, accessed online at 11/2/2015. He makes the point that previous cultural forms

Bartocci highlights the importance of understanding such phenomena for psychiatrists in order for them to assess varying forms of supernatural beliefs, such as these, as clearly as they can distinguish between illusions and hallucinations. And importantly, he illuminates to a certain extent the combination of beliefs and carefully orchestrated trance states promoted in a socially reinforced coherent group process long enough to carry out the assigned mission. Europeans and Americans who are typically privatized in their conceptions of social life and religious experience are often unable to comprehend or take into account the negative uses of many such techniques when they become part of a collective consciousness for good or for serious social ill. Bartocci argues that contemporary experience of some of these processes may be far more powerful and sustained over a longer period of time than more ancient uses of such practices.

Making Use of Other Disciplines without Reductionism in the Study of Spirituality

In my own reading of much of the literature, now too exhaustive for one person to control, social scientific, psychological, medical, and to a certain extent neuroscientific studies related to spirituality frequently develop their own conceptual construct of a definition of spirituality or the phenomenon they propose to study. This severing of spirituality from 'religion' or the explicitly 'spiritual' in the sense that Perrin defines spirituality, tends to minimize the contribution of long and deep traditions related to the complex phenomenon of spirituality.

In qualitative studies, narratives of subjects interviewed according to a standard set of questions, often open ended, are coded and analyzed to develop novel definitions that are often highly reductive and relatively unrelated to the traditions out of which the subjects' experience has emerged. At the same time, these often reductive findings may reveal helpful ways of recognizing the usefulness of some practices beyond their value to spiritual life. From my own perspective, although many may feel differently, definitions derived in this way accelerate the separation of the spiritual from the religious. Those practicing a religion lose the guidance for their practice of spirituality of the discernment gained over centuries as well as the wide variety of spiritual paths within a tradition that keep us company and deepen our insight into our own practices and expressions of lived spirituality.

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and methods of fostering trance states were less controlled and less intense, allowing persons to return to ordinary states of consciousness relatively easily.

For instance, the effects and benefits of some practices related to physical health such as relieving stress, reducing anxiety or depression, promoting relaxation and sleep, lowering blood pressure, and assisting with pain control have all been established whether or not these particular benefits constitute the primary reasons someone chooses to engage in specific practices. In this culture of evidential effects, it is no longer self-evident what the spiritual goals or uses of these practices might be. They may be useful in lowering blood pressure, increasing physical balance, or resisting osteoporosis. They may help us self-regulate our physical and mental health but do they contribute to love of God, love of self, love of neighbor, or the development of a robust and well-balanced spiritual life in terms of self-transcendence and relationship with God?

The majority of these studies have been focused on three major forms of Buddhist meditation practice: focused attention, mindfulness, and compassion. Each of these processes when measured in meditators with 10,000 or more hours of practice[27] demonstrate an effect on brain plasticity and identify differing areas of the brain which are involved in each of these three distinct practices. These non-theistic forms of meditation are now widely used in many hospitals, schools, and other settings for their beneficial effects. Psychological effects include: faster reaction to stimuli and greater resistance to various forms of stress. Mindfulness practice shows reduced activity in the brain areas related to anxiety (insular cortex and the amygdala). Loving-Kindness, altruistic compassion meditation is now associated with positive emotions, while a purely empathic response often resulted in compassion fatigue or emotional burn-out. Thus, there is a possibility that loving kindness meditation offers some protection to care-givers and others working with suffering people.[28]

What do we know about less experienced meditators who will never approach 10,000 hours of meditation? A study in 2011, provides the beginning of an answer. After eight weeks of 30 minutes a day of mindfulness meditation, there are measurable changes in gray-matter density in parts of the brain associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress.[29]

Neuroscience has developed rapidly in its ability to identify the underlying structures of the brain that are affected by various forms of religious experience

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[27] 10,000 hours translates to 27 years of twice daily, 30 min. meditation periods. Frequently, practitioners do meditation intensives of up to a month of 4-6 hours of practice per day. A 30 day Ignatian Retreat of 4 prayer periods a day would accrue 120 hours of contemplative prayer.

[28] See Matthieu Ricard, Antoine Lutz & Richard J. Davidson, 'Mind of the meditator', in: *Scientific American* (November 2014), 38-45. Accessed online at Scientificamerican.com, November 2014.

[29] Sindya H. Bhanoo, 'How meditation may change the brain', in: *The New York Times*, January 28, 2011. Accessed online, January 29, 2011.

and which some experiments such as the 'God Helmet' and its recent replication, actually stimulate the areas of the brain which respond to a 'sensed presence'.[30] Because subjects report visual phenomena and a sense of presence or exalted feelings when specific areas of the brain are stimulated does not mean that mechanical stimulation produces a mystical experience. But they do show how our brains are capable of registering an experience of the presence of God, or of other people in our lives. Some of these experiences are of a psychic nature and many studies do not differentiate an experience of the presence of God from that of other persons both dead and alive.

However, the identification of different experiences with the various parts of the brain stimulated does support reflection on why individuals may be more influenced by right brain or left brain activity during mystical experience and why those experiences are so different from one another. While all humans have the neural pathways that support mystical experiences, a limited number actually experience them. Todd R. Murphy suggests that mystic experiences may play a role in human evolution because these traits motivate behavior that benefits their social group. Receiving input from both left brain and right brain persons improve the group's chances during times of threats or opportunities.[31]

A major meta-analysis of Meditation programs for psychological stress and well-being concluded: mindfulness meditation programs had moderate evidence of deceased anxiety at 8 weeks and somewhat less at 3-6 months, likewise a decrease in depression at 8 weeks, and again somewhat less benefit at 3-6 months. It showed some benefit in pain management. Thus, 'meditation programs can result in small to moderate reductions of multiple negative dimensions of psychological stress'.[32] Also of importance, they acknowledged that 'these small effects are comparable with what would be expected from the use of an antidepressant in a primary care population without the associated side toxicities'.[33] This conclusion is actually understated as the short term *effect size* of meditation was double that of medication.

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[30] Carlos A. Tinoco & Joao P.L. Ortiz, 'Magnetic stimulation of the temporal cortex: A partial "God Helmet" replication study', in: *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 5 (2014) no.3, 234-257. Accessed online, April 8, 2016.

[31] Todd R. Murphy, 'The role of religious and mystic experiences in human evolution: A corollary hypothesis for neurotheology', in: *NeuroQuantology* 8 (2010) no.4, 495-508.

[32] Madhav Goyal, Sonal Singh, Erica M.S. Sibinga, Newda F. Gould, Anastasia Rowland-Seymour, Ritu Harma, Zackary Berger, Dana Sleicher, David D. Maron, Hasan M. Shihab, Padmini D. Ranasinghe, Shauna Linn, Shonmali Saha, Eric B. Bass, & Jennifer A. Haythornthwaite, 'Meditation programs for psychological stress and well-being: A systematic review and meta-analyis', in: *Journal of the American Medical Association: Internal Medicine* 174 (2014), 357-365: 357. Accessed online on April 4, 2014.

[33] Ibid., 364.

We might ask the question, then what about Christian forms of prayer? There are only two that have been studied rigorously in the last ten years particularly related to healing. Larry Dossey[34] was and remains a pioneer in this area of non-local or distant healing practices through prayer and other forms of intention have been shown to demonstrate changes in the receivers' bodies through fMRI's. And these correlate with the healers/ intercessors distant focus on that person.[35] A national Institutes of Health survey of the ten most common complementary and alternative practices or modalities that are used by Americans today found that of the top ten, three involved prayer: 'prayer specifically for one's own health (43%), prayer by others for one's own health (24,4%), [and] participation in prayer group for one's own health (9,6%)'.[36] Now more than ten years later, evidence continues to accumulate that distant or non-local healing through prayer or compassionate intention does affect others. The survey information on prayer in the US suggests that within Christian communities, we might be more persistent in collective intercessory prayer.

Centering Prayer is the other form of Christian prayer that has begun to be studied scientifically. At a session of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality in 2014, in San Diego, CA. Michael Spezio and Andrew Drietcer gave a presentation titled, 'Heartfulness as Mindfulness: Imitatio of Affectivity and Perspective in Christian Contemplative Practice'. Centering Prayer is the well-known Christian contemplative practice described in the 14th century anonymous text of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating popularized this practice under the name of centering prayer to promote a form of Christian meditation when Budhhist practices were becoming popular. It uses a focusing 'word' to combat mind wandering during periods when one is unaware of resting in the simple presence of God. When this focus wavers, one returns to a simple word until one stabilizes in contemplative presence again. Michael Spezio, a psychologist and neuroscientist did similar fMRI imaging of persons practicing Centering Prayer as has been done with Buddhist meditators. He discovered connections to affectivity and love were the measurable

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[34] Stephan A. Schwartz & Larry Dossey, 'Nonlocality, intention and observer effects in healing studies: Laying a foundation for the future', in: *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 6 (2010) no.5, 295-307.

[35] Jeanne Achterberg, Karin Cooke, Todd Richards, Leanna J. Standish, Leila Kozak, & James Lake, 'Evidence for correlations between distant intentionality and brain function in recipients: A functional magnetic resonance imaging analysis', in: *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 11 (2005) no.6, 965-971. Downloaded from Yale University, 04/03/2014.

[36] P.M. Barnes, E. Powell-Griner, K. McFann, & R.L. Nahin., 'Complementary and alternative medicine use among adults: United States 2002', in: *Advance Data* (2004) no.343 (May 27), 1-19, here 3.

result. Spezio wrote in an email, 'Our preliminary analyses of our imaging data from Centering Prayer suggest a pattern that emerges when we contrast periods of re-centering to the periods directly preceding them (i.e. periods of mind-wandering). We see larger fMRI Bold activations in primary sensory (visual, auditory) areas during mind-wandering compared to Centering Prayer. During Centering Prayer we see patterns suggesting increased recruitment of socio-emotional networks'.[37] As the authors discussed this in their presentation, they described mindfulness/concentrative practices of Buddhism as quieting the mind: less oxygen, a resting state, and deactivation. Centering Prayer, in contrast, maintained visual memory, a more active mental state, receptivity to perceptual experience, and visual awareness. In order to test if centering prayer opened the person to affective encounter, subjects were asked to decide which person in a pair would be a better caretaker for a friend's 5 year old daughter for 10 minutes and pay attention to something boring for 10 minutes. After the viewing of the potential caretakers, there were greater activations in active relational regions of the brain. *Symnonesis* – dialogical encounter with one another and with self. This is thinking from within the loving encounter. This is a perspective informed by the view of the self in relationship. In Centering Prayer the primary relationship is with a loving God. Much of the Christian prayer tradition is focused on 'heartfulness'.

Conclusion

In my explorations over the years of various forms of meditation and their psychological effects, I have found it very beneficial to gain greater clarity about the structure of various forms of practice across religious traditions as well as within Christianity. These include text based reflection, imagination, movement, dance, breath, concentration, and open awareness processes. Religious traditions frequently include a full range of practices from highly concentrative ones to the most receptive ones. Focusing attention and formulating intention are also scripted by the practices and their theologies, that is the teachings vis a vis ultimate reality. I want to advocate that as scholars in the field of spirituality

[37] Michael Spezio, email to author, February 17, 2016. Notes from presentation, November 23, 2014. See also: Rebecca Sachs Norris, 'Examining the structure and role of emotion: Contributions of neurobiology to the study of embodied religious experience', in:. Zygon 40 (2005), no.1, 181-199; and 'The energetic heart: Bioelectromagnetic communication within and between people', in: P.J. Rosch & M.S. Markov (Eds.), *Clinical applications of bioelectromagnetic medicine*, New York: Marcel Dekker, 2004, 541-562, available at www.heartmath.org/research.

that we can learn much from the very wide variety of research and studies in spirituality at the present time.

At the same time, I believe it is important after crossing over to other ways of practicing spirituality and describing the results of spiritual practices from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that we return again to our own Christian tradition with greater insight. What can be measured is always only partial. Many of the studies from medicine, health, psychology, etc., can open up new areas for us to explore and offer important insights into the potential benefits of some of our most important practices of which we may have been unaware or offer clues about how to teach and engage in some of these practices with greater effectiveness, given the particular setting. Those benefits might not be why we do these particular practices from a religious perspective. Likewise, I believe it is important to ask critical questions that a purely scientific method cannot answer. What does it mean to be in relationship with the living God, not only in our contemplative practice but in the robust fullness of Christian living, which is always more than a single practice. Why do we engage in social or ecological practices for the sake of the common good rather than exclusively for their benefit to us? The abundance of mystical and spiritual texts now available beyond their original language groups has gifted us with complexity, variety, and fresh awareness of how God has made God's presence felt within the Christian tradition. I believe we only partially understand our own resources within Christian spirituality even as we continue to learn from, understand, and integrate a greater variety of resources cross-culturally and internationally. In terms of practicing spirituality, our attention needs to extend beyond prayer and mysticism to encompass the whole range of ways we practice Christian spirituality relationally, ecologically, socially, and communally.