

Academic Life and Scholarship as Spiritual Practice

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AS A PASTORAL THEOLOGIAN WHO HAS SPECIALIZED in Christian spirituality for more than twenty-five years, I am deeply engaged with the role of spiritual practice. In this essay, I would like to explore the possibility that academic life, and scholarship in particular, *is itself* a spiritual practice. This claim may be self-evident to some; after all, the medieval university was originally staffed by religious persons who assumed that their scholarship was spiritual practice. But for others, living on this side of the Enlightenment, scholarship is simply (though profoundly) a professional calling, and we may not perceive it as having anything to do with our spiritual lives.

Let's start by considering the term *practice*. In *Saving Work*, Rebecca Chopp notes that a practice is a "socially shared form of behavior . . . a pattern of meaning and action that is both culturally constructed and individually instantiated. The notion of practice draws us to inquire into the shared activities of groups of persons that provide meaning and orientation to the world and that guide action." Chopp, like others following Alasdair MacIntyre's treatment of *practice* in *After Virtue*, understands practices to be bodily, social, interactive, cooperative, and performed with rule-like regularities.

In terms of academic scholarship, this sense of practice makes perfect sense: What scholars do is shared broadly, over long periods of time, addresses human needs, and constitutes a way of life. Scholarship is bodily, social, interactive, and cooperative. We engage in actions such as research, writing, experimenting, drawing conclusions from data, and other methodologically consistent behaviors that others agree have a reasonable chance of advancing knowledge and/or uncovering truth—and, I would add, constructing something elegant and beautiful.

But what about the word *spiritual*? The first thing we might notice is that it is the adjective form of the noun *spirit*. In common usage, the English word *spirit*, from Latin *spiritus* ("breath"), usually refers to a non-corporeal substance, and is contrasted with the material body. It is understood as a vital force that constitutes the living quality of material beings. If we stay here, however, we can easily get lost in a dualism that we would do well to avoid.

At this point, I have to claim my particular standpoint within Christianity. I ask those who profess other religious standpoints to critique the adequacy of my logic from within your own traditions.

Christian theology uses the term *Spirit* to describe a person of the Trinity, the "Holy Spirit," which is to say, to describe both God's reality and God's manifestations in creation. The term *spiritual* appears early in Christian texts, such as in 1 Corinthians 2:11-16, which helps to define "spiritual" as participating in the very life of the divine:

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also, no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

That is, according to Paul, only humans can know the human spirit, and likewise, only God (here: "Spirit of God") can know God's spirit. But God's Spirit has been given to us, so we can ourselves (at least begin to) interpret and participate in God's reality and activity.

For Paul, spirit is that gift given to humans that enables us to partake of the divine. So, the spiritual life joins us to God's creative activity toward that flourishing. And hopefully, we are at last coming to recognize that flourishing is very much material, bodily, fleshly, and earthly, as well as immaterial.

Paul's claim is that we have been given the enormous gift of participating in the very life of God ("But we have the mind of Christ," 1 Cor. 2:16). The spiritual, then, is what is open to the action of the Spirit that comes to us as gift. But, to have access to it, one must dispose oneself by means of practices (*askesis*, from which comes the word *exercise*, and carries the sense of bringing mastery via repetition).

It will help us in developing our larger argument on scholarship as spiritual practice to take a bit of a digression into the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality, as it has struggled over the years with various understandings of the word *spirituality*. To understand *spirituality*, I will offer a definition that our GTU colleague, Sandra Schneiders, included in her essay in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*. Spirituality is "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."

Walter Principe points us in the same direction in his 1983 essay "Toward Defining Spirituality": "A person's 'chosen ideal' and the striving to live toward that ideal is 'spirituality' at the existential level." Note that that "chosen ideal" need not necessarily be framed religiously.

These definitions remind us that spirituality is neither purely spontaneous, nor something done to us without our participation by another agent, nor simply a collection of episodic experiences. Instead, spirituality includes intentionality—conscious choice is integral to this understanding. We choose to engage in certain activities either because of their intrinsic value or because of where these actions lead. Those actions are determined in light of their end. Their final goal is something that is highly valuable, and indeed, sets the primary orientation and direction of one's life. Furthermore, this end is not purely self-referential, it's not about one's purely private satisfaction, but it pulls us out of our limited horizons, propels us beyond ourselves to attain this ultimate value.

Of course, one could put a less than altruistic goal at the center of one's life: pleasure, sex, money, and power all too frequently become enshrined in the position of "ultimate value that one perceives." Here, Schneiders insists that an adequate understanding of spirituality excludes such



Elizabeth Liebert. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Theological Seminary

negative life-organizations as addictions and exploitative projects that seek one's own good at the expense of others. The "ultimate value" must function "as a horizon leading the person toward growth." I want to underline that there is an inescapably moral dimension to this understanding of spirituality: true spirituality does not use power to dominate and destroy; rather it enhances individuals and communities, breaks down power differentials, and sets individuals and communities free to live deeper and fuller lives.

We can, I believe, connect Schneiders's definition back to Paul's use of the term *spiritual* as being of the mind of God, and then express this reality in a framework broader than the Christian distinctives that I used to construct it: that is, we can order our lives around searching out manifestations of the true, the good, and the beautiful to such a degree that these become our ultimate goal.

A spiritual practice, then, becomes the regular, repeated, intentional, embodied, actions that lead, step by step, toward enhanced good, true, and beautiful, shared with and evaluated within a community of shared practice according to agreed-upon standards of excellence.

Scholarship, in this understanding, can become a primary vocation, and its practice, indeed, spiritual.

Now that we have constructed a common understanding of spiritual practice and scholarship as spiritual practice, let me invite you into a spiritual practice that I believe can be embraced by scholars of many disciplines and religious traditions. It is the practice of *lectio divina*, or divine reading.

Lectio divina appears early in the Western monastic tradition and even earlier in Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine. (That means, incidentally, that *lectio divina* is “abroad in the land” during the rise of the Western university starting around the 11th century.) In the Benedictine context, *lectio divina* was the consistent reading and rumination, usually of the scriptures, that permeated the entire day. In the 12th century work *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo II formalized these steps into the method often taught today as *lectio divina*:

Lectio/reading

Meditatio/ruminating

Oratio/praying

Contemplatio/resting

For our purpose of considering scholarly inquiry as a spiritual practice, let me offer a brief explication of these familiar steps. But first, a word about *intention*. This is a strategy for beginning any spiritual exercise that comes from Ignatius of Loyola. In every one of his *Spiritual Exercises*, he tells the one making the Exercises: “Ask for what you desire.” Asking at the head of the activity is a way to invite yourself to enter consciously into the practice, to dedicate it to the service of the Divine or of truth, and to begin to focus your attention—a very practical way to “show up” more fully. A basic intention that may work for you as scholar: follow the good, true, or beautiful wherever they take you—and share this journey with others.

The first step is *lectio*: In its origin, *lectio* was text-based, but we might extend to include placing loving attention upon whatever is the subject of study. You turn it around and around in your mind, imagination, and intuition, being exquisitely curious about it in all its particularity. (I am claiming something for *lectio* that bleeds over into *meditatio*, but bear with me, as I want to push the

analogy with *meditatio* to a different place.)

In “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to Love of God,” Simone Weil invites us to develop the capacity for attention. She advocates attention in everything related to study, even such boring activities as grammar and algebra proofs. “Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer.” Helpfully, in the very next paragraph, she widens her perspective to include non-believers: “Quite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit.”

Attention, according to Weil,

consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts. . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.

Weil claims that such attention is difficult, more difficult than simply working long hours. She believes that there is something in us that is repugnant to the laser-like attention she is proposing, and requires our vigilance. Clearly, this kind of attention, at this cost, is, for Weil, a spiritual discipline for students and scholars.

Close to thirty years ago, Jesuit Walter Burghardt defined contemplation to be “a long loving look at the real.” I think Burghardt and Weil are talking about the same activity, the same quality of attentive openness to what is there, as it is, as unclouded by our own assumptions as we can allow it to be given our situated humanness. Weil suggests a more imageless path, and Burghardt a path that can be full of images—the traditional apophatic and kataphatic distinction. I don’t think we need to choose between them; the choice may

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come precisely from the object of our attention, or it may come from the way our practice begins to open up with much repetition. In either case, says Weil, the object of our attention may reveal its bit of the truth to us—as a gift.

Meditatio: *Meditatio* was the continual rumination on whatever the text opened up. In the context of academic scholarship, the parallel, I propose, includes such activities as framing a line of investigation and formulating a research question, then deciding, given the question, on an appropriate method that balances one's own subjectivity with rigorous attention to what is really there. Then comes the long process of engaging that reality at depth, over time, and noticing what happens between you, the observer, and the observed (both are changed).

Oratio: The classic spiritual practice of *oratio* includes addressing God directly in light of one's *lectio* and *meditatio*. Similarly, scholarly practice entails engaging in dialogue about the reality one has been exploring through appropriate scholarly disciplines. It could be talking to oneself; it could be talking back to one's subject or writing about it. But it could also be teaching about it (how many of us test out what we are thinking in the classroom!) or speaking in public about the subject; here the scholar controls the exposition in large part.

But there is still another level: deep collegial sharing where each party engages as both initiator and receiver, listening together to how others see the same reality.

Quantum theorist David Bohm claims that this deep conversation, which he terms *dialogue*, furthers science, as it occurs when a group “becomes open to the flow of a larger intelligence.” In this dialogue, participants seek to participate together in a larger pool of meaning that is always developing. In this kind of dialogue, the whole organizes the parts, and it can form individuals into a powerful learning community. Scholarly *oratio*, perhaps?

Contemplatio: *Contemplatio* consisted of resting, present to all that is, in particular to the Divine hovering within and around. Is there an analogy in our scholarship?

I think this sense of simply being present brings us back to Simone Weil's understanding of absolute attention being prayer, and Walter Burghardt's description of contempla-

tion as a patient, leisurely, unhurried, loving look at the real, allowing ourselves to be open to it, to be captured by it, to accept it on its own terms, to love it, and to respond to it in such a way that the world becomes better.

In an early essay describing a spirituality of education, Parker Palmer offered some thoughts relevant not only to the contemplative dimension of scholarship but also to this

whole question of scholarship as spiritual practice. He observes:

To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will. To know in truth is to allow oneself to be known as well,

to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours. Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known; even in separation the two become part of each other's life and fate. . . . In truthful knowing, the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known.

So, how is scholarship a spiritual practice? The careful work of the scholar can be transformative precisely in the way it brings us face to face with the radical otherness of what it is that we study. And in the very wrestling with this otherness, we might even be transformed. That is, not only might our scholarly opinions and conclusions be revised, but also the very way we act and live might also change. And the world itself. ♦

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