

ARTICLE

A Paradigm of Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Spiritual but not Religious

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Abstract

This article constructs a paradigm for religious leaders, teachers, or members for dialogue with people for whom traditional or institutional religious doctrine, moral teaching, or worship have little or no efficacy. The paradigm consists of four sensibilities. The first is the value of social science analyses of the tectonic shifts affecting religion and spirituality today. William James offers an early 20th-century example of the social science approach. The second is consideration of theological resources from the Christian tradition that may enrich such dialogue. So called “universal spiritualities” are identified in the Christian anthropologies of two Christian theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. These are explored for their appeal beyond an explicitly Christian context. Sensibility to the complexity of religion is a third consideration, with emphasis on its constitutive elements of creed, moral code, and liturgical cult. Finally, Sandra Schneiders’ hermeneutical approach to the study of spirituality and religion is recommended as an essential sensibility for hospitable dialogue across difference.

Keywords

spirituality, religion, theology, methodology, hermeneutics, Christian anthropology, William James, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Sandra Schneiders, SBNR

In recent decades, most religious leaders, teachers, and members have encountered individuals or groups that identify as spiritual but not religious. That designation can mean many different things, even among those who claim it as their own.¹ However interpreted, this identity and the growing demographic associated with it present pressing questions.²

While this phenomenon impinges on many religions, this article proposes a paradigm for hospitable dialogue across difference from a Christian perspective. How should one respond to people of good will who lay claim to a spiritual life but find Christian creed, cult, or moral code to be irrelevant, unhelpful, or even antagonistic? Does the separation between spirituality and religion inevitably lead to divorce between the two?³ Will dismissal of doctrine, disregard of moral teaching, and disaffection from regular forms of worship continue to spread, especially among younger generations? Do all those who use the acronym SBNR necessarily subscribe to a totally secular worldview that no longer sees human purpose or fullness in a transcendent reality, but only in a closed or immanent frame?⁴ Or, rather, have they simply lost faith in traditional religions as trustworthy paths toward the transcendent?

The social sciences have shed light on many aspects of the spiritual but not religious phenomenon.⁵ Theology is another resource for enriching

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- 1 In their 2023 survey, the Pew Research Center found that 22% of Americans identify as SBNR, 21% as neither spiritual nor religious; 58% identify with an organized religion. <https://www.pewresearch.org>.
 - 2 For a thorough study, see Linda Mercandante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Mercandante's research reveals generational differences across the SBNR demographic regarding their engagement with doctrine, morality, worship and other religious categories. Also, Mercandante, "Do the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) Want a Theology Without Walls?," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (January 2022), 77–82. See also Michael Horton, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual but Not Religious" in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024).
 - 3 Kwok Piu-Lan uses the terms "post-Christians" and "latent Christians" in "Interfaith Encounter," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 538.
 - 4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor analyzes post-Enlightenment, Western culture as presenting a stark choice between increasingly discredited belief in a transcendent reality and a secular humanism that seeks human fulfillment in immanent experience. See also his recently published *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2024).
 - 5 For a study of the complex relationship between spirituality and religion that draws from the social sciences, see Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual*

contemporary conversations about spirituality and its relationship with religion. To that end, this paper is an exercise in practical theology insofar as it focuses on the interplay between theory and practice.⁶ It explores the usefulness of theology for dialogue among those who approach spirituality from different points of view and conviction. Often, it is assumed that theology's only purpose in these conversations is apologetic, defensive, and/or ultimately dismissive of the "but not religious" position. That assumption can foreclose dialogue across difference. The aim of the theological reflections proposed in this article is to foster a hospitable environment for communication and mutual understanding about the relationship between spirituality and religion.

Part One emphasizes awareness of methodology in the study of spirituality. It provides an overview of the methodologies of social science studies of spirituality, highlighting the American psychologist and philosopher of pragmatism William James as a prototype of non-theological interest in spiritual experience.

Part Two reviews the nature of theological methodology and its embrace of faith as a part of method. It examines the theological anthropologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner and suggests that there are nascent universal spiritualities nestled in their understandings of what it means to be human. Their theologies of spirituality are proposed as possible points of convergence or shared horizons in conversations with spiritual but not religious persons.

Part Three offers a brief theological perspective on religion. Noting that neither spirituality nor religion is a univocal concept, it discerns three basic elements of institutional religion: creed, cult, and moral code. It takes note of how spiritual but not religious persons may accept, reject, or negotiate among these three elements. Finally, Part Four presents theologian Sandra Schneiders's hermeneutical approach to the study of spirituality, with her emphasis on the importance of listening over theory to make room for manifold methods and perspectives.

Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

- 6 Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). Osmer's work is among the most compelling presentations of the methodology of practical theology, emphasizing the reflective interplay between doctrine, theology and lived experience. The four methodological tasks he identifies are the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative, and the pragmatic. While not traced explicitly in this article, they inform its approach.

Part One: Methodology in the Study of Spirituality

Scholar of Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn once quipped that a quick and cursory search of the term *spirituality* provided him in short order with 35 different definitions.⁷ The very number of definitions is evidence of the growing interest in spirituality in recent decades. McGinn suggests that to understand the nature and extent of this interest, and to bring some order and direction to the study of spirituality, it is important to identify different methodological approaches in the field, which produce different understandings of the term.⁸ This article focuses on theological understandings of spirituality in order to explore its relationship with religion. However, given that today's interest in spirituality extends beyond the bailiwick of theologians, we begin by taking a brief look at social science approaches.

The social sciences use a variety of methodologies and assumptions in the study of spirituality. Disciplines such as the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, the anthropology of religion and other social sciences bring their own distinctive methods, sets of assumptions, and bodies of literature to examine the topic. Likewise, the philosophy of religion exercises its own rational approach to understanding spirituality as a dimension of human experience. In recent decades, neuroscience has also shown interest in spiritual practices such as meditation, contemplation, and yoga, as well as possible correlations between brain function and general neurological activity.⁹

7 Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," in *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 29. In addition to this valuable anthology, a classic text in the contemporary study of spirituality is Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, second edition (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

8 McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 30–35. He names three general approaches: the anthropological, the theological, and the historical-contextual. The latter, although of interest in the history of spirituality, is not invoked here. Papers presented at the September 2019 "Evolving Methodologies in the Study of Spirituality" conference at the Antonianum in Rome can be found in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 20, No. 1 (Spring 2020). The articles by Frolich, Villegas, and Dubois survey and critique new approaches in method.

9 For some resources see Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, Fifth Edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 2018); Peter B. Clarke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook on the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an example of neuroscientific studies see, see Judson A. Brewer, Patrick Worhunsky, Jeremy R. Gray, Yi-Yuan

All these approaches prescind from any transcendent realm and make no truth claims about the existence of God. Faith is not a constitutive factor in their methodologies, although it may be an object of study. In addition, they generally attend only to what can be observed, measured and predicted, and they thereby draw our attention to important facts and trends. In addition, the lexicons of such approaches to the study of spirituality brim with words and phrases like authenticity, inner life, depth dimension, becoming a person in the fullest sense, a way of handling the human condition, purpose of existence, and so forth. If the word transcendence appears, it is transposed into the key of self-transcendence, understood as generous consideration of, and response to, others, society, and the earth. While individual scholars in these fields may themselves be believers or adherents of a religious tradition, in their academic study of spirituality they bracket faith and eschew theological categories in favor of elucidating the effects of spirituality and spiritual practice on human experience and behavior.

At the turn of the 20th century, the American philosopher and keen observer of human psychology William James pioneered much of what characterizes today's popular approaches to spirituality. He introduced a "non-theological" but sympathetic study of what he called personal religious experience, which today would more likely be labeled spiritual experience. He set many of the parameters and established a new ethos for analyzing such phenomena as religious conversion, spiritual dryness or depression, happiness, virtue, asceticism, and mysticism.

James's book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, surveys different examples of religious or spiritual experiences of historical religious figures, examined in light of James' distinctive philosophical-psychological approach. The subtitle of the book, *A Study in Human Nature*, signals that this is not a theological effort. He states up front that he does not intend to proceed "out of religion in the sense of which we take it, theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations."¹⁰ He makes it clear that "the immediate personal experience will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all."¹¹ His interest is to explore "the feelings,

Tang, Jochen Weber, and Hedy Kober, "Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108 (November 2011). See also, Chapter 28, "The sense of the sacred," in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, Vol. II (Perspectiva Press, 2021), 193ff.

10 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 42.

11 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42.

acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”¹² While subsequent studies have significantly improved on James’ methodology, his approach presaged the kind of interest in spirituality that is popular and accessible today. He provided a proleptic analysis of what has eventuated into today’s spiritual but not religious phenomenon.¹³

While approaches to spirituality such as that of James avoid metaphysics and make no claims about the reality of transcendent Being, they do not necessary dismiss the value of belief. James himself is a good example of someone who strove to affirm the healthiness of belief from the point of view of his philosophical pragmatism and his interest in human psychology.¹⁴ Despite methodological differences, social scientific and theological approaches need not be in opposition. They can enrich each other. Depth, interiority, authenticity, purpose, self-transcendence, the ground of existence, and other such categories also name dimensions of Christian spiritualities and of the spiritualities within other religious traditions. Indeed, such interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary study and dialogue is crucial to advance the contemporary study of spirituality.¹⁵ A fulsome environment for contemporary dialogue about the relationship between spirituality and religion benefits from the kind of sensibility fostered by social science methodologies. Such studies, as modeled by James over a century ago, can

12 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42. James provides as good a definition of spirituality as one might find in the social science fields today.

13 Mary Frolich, “Spirit, Spirituality, and Contemplative Method,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 20. No. 1 (Spring 2020), 31–44, especially 39–41. Frolich provides a valuable overview of recent developments in methodology for the study of spirituality. See also Claire Petitmengin, ed., *Ten Years of Viewing from Within: The Legacy of Francisco Varela* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009), in which she elaborates six approaches in method.

14 James’ other important work on religious experience, *The Will to Believe* (1897), exemplifies a sympathetic and incisive analysis of belief. He does not reduce spirituality to psychology, as Freud would later do. For contemporary critiques of James’ work see Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), and Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

15 Pope Francis’ *Motu Proprio Ad theologiam promovendam* (On Promoting Theology), 1 November 2023, encourages theologians to enter “transdisciplinary dialogue” in order to enrich theology with the insights of the arts, humanities and social sciences, as well as dialogue with other faiths and with non-believers. www.vatican.va.

afford respect for religious conviction and spiritual experience, without appeal to doctrine or dogma.

Part Two: Theological Approaches to Understanding Spirituality

Theological approaches to spirituality, which honor the assumptions of faith and examine perspectives of religious commitment, bring a different sensibility to the paradigm for hospitable dialogue. In past centuries, the theological study of spirituality was called ascetical-mystical theology.¹⁶ It focused on the objective study of more remarkable aspects of the mystical experience and ascetical practice of exceptional Christians, such as the testimonies of medieval and post-Reformation mystics. Contemporary theological approaches to spirituality devote more attention to the existential, affective, and social dynamics that constitute a life of faith, as well as the complexity of the quest to understand a transcendent reality that ultimately eludes the endeavors of reason.¹⁷

The classic definition of theology, from the works of Saint Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, is “faith seeking understanding.”¹⁸ The exigencies of modern life have brought both variation and caution to Anselm’s definition. Jürgen Moltmann reflects the wider concerns of contemporary theology by defining it as “hope seeking understanding.”¹⁹ Thomas Williams notes that our present perspective allows us to discern even in Anselm’s incipient scholasticism “an active love of God seeking a deeper

16 Especially in Catholic circles. See Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 148–49. See also Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit*, chapters 11–15.

17 Diana L. Villegas, *The Christian Path in a Pluralistic World and the Study of Spirituality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), argues that theology should not take second place to social science studies of spirituality, but rather is especially equipped for that study because of its rich, long history of attention to spiritual experience. The present article follows her lead by elaborating a theological paradigm for engagement with the SBNR. See Mary Frohlich’s review of Villegas’ book in *Spiritus* 11, No. 2 (Spring 2012), 143–45.

18 This phrase was the original title of his work *Proslogion* (1077–1087), and it expresses the underlying quest in all of his writings. Anselm was indebted to Saint Augustine of Hippo who 600 years earlier wrote, “So then, do not try to understand in order to believe, but believe in order to understand.” See Homily 29.6 (regarding John 7:14–18) in Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John, 1–40*, Vol. III/12, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009).

19 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, trans. James E. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 33.

knowledge of God,” which suggests subjective, affective, and volitional elements implicit in early medieval theology.²⁰ Contemporary theologies of spirituality allot more space to explore those same elements. Kwok Piu Lan opens the theological lens even wider in order to locate theological inquiry in its social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts. Her writing, informed by Asian perspective and history, provides compelling, comprehensive arguments for methodological recognition of the milieu from which any theology emerges.²¹

There is also the question of language. Gerald O’Collins ended his book *The Case Against Dogma* with the bon mot that theologians do not speak for God; they must simply watch their language in the presence of God. “Theologians,” he writes, “no less than philosophers are bound by Wittgenstein’s charge ‘to battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.’”²² Methodological and semantic diligence are important dynamics in any contemporary theological study of spirituality.

With these provisos in mind, we turn to two twentieth-century Christians to discover theological ideas to enrich our understanding of spirituality. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner both developed a Christian theological spirituality. Each did this by building upon a distinctive Christian anthropology, that is, a theological understanding of what it means to be human. Hence, their understandings of Christian spirituality arose from their understanding of what it means to be human. Each identifies an inherent and constitutive spiritual dimension of human nature which is open to transcendent reality. Each finds the goal of human life and the fullness of human purpose to lie beyond the quotidian concerns and material limits of our experience.

First, a methodological question related to this study: can one find in their Christian anthropologies what we might call “universal spiritualities” that could also appeal to and enrich those beyond the Christian community. The term “universal spirituality” does not imply a comprehensive theory meant to supplant anyone’s spiritual practice or understanding, be it

20 Thomas Williams, “Anselm of Canterbury,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu>), 2.1.

21 Kwok Piu-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021). Regarding method, she advises a “double suspicion and reclamation” in “Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3:2 (Fall, 1987), 121–24.

22 Gerald O’Collins, *The Case Against Dogma* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 100.

traditional or alternative. Rather, it suggests the possibility of a shared standpoint about what it means to be human and, in particular, about what it means to be spiritual, a standpoint that can be shared across differences among those who identify as religious and those who identify as spiritual but not religious. Theology offers insights about human meaning and purpose that have emerged in its long history and substantial debates. Its wisdom, when offered with methodological humility, can contribute substantially to conversation among all manner of religious believers and spiritual seekers.²³

The theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner offer particular promise to dialogue across difference for two reasons. The first is that among 20th-century theologians, their Christian anthropologies, as we shall see, are particularly suited to wider humanistic dialogue—both theologians engaged in such dialogue beyond the ecclesiastical boundaries that James had eschewed earlier in the century, though each is also grounded in Christian faith. Second, each of them emphasized the importance of a deep connection between theology and spirituality, that is, between intellectual exercise and affective, volitional practice.

The following brief overviews of their theologies are in no way complete. Rather, each section surveys a key idea from the theological anthropologies of each author—beauty and being from von Balthasar, and the supernatural existential from Rahner—to illustrate how certain theological ideas can enrich conversation between Christian believers and those who identify as spiritual, but not religious.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Any theological affirmation that spirituality is common to all people and thereby constitutive of human nature rests upon a theology of creation. Based on the biblical belief that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and made for relationship with God (Deut. 6:4-9), a

23 One might invoke the hermeneutical theory of Hans Georg Gadamer and situate such common standpoints in the “fusion of horizons” that emerge amidst open and hospitable dialogue. See his *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinscheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 282. His hermeneutics is not a method for achieving an idealized, objective empathy. It is rather a call to awareness of one’s own position, and the multiple reasons behind it, both rational and affective. See also Mariah Terey Cushing, “Gadamer’s Philosophical Concept of ‘Prejudice’ and its Use in Comparative Theology,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 29 (March 2020), 19–37.

theology of universal spirituality seeks to discern evidence of desire for, and orientation to, God at the very heart of being human. Balthasar finds this universal desire and orientation in our innate love of beauty.

By beauty, Balthasar does not mean culturally relative aesthetic standards. Rather he affirms the beauty of being itself. The natural forms of the physical world and our experience of them are beautiful epiphanies of mystery, the mystery of their own being, and the infinite mystery of the creator above, beyond and within every being. All elements at all levels of God's creation are vessels of light attracting and drawing us into ever-deeper engagement with them and their natural beauty.²⁴ He describes this process as "the mysterious character inherent in the knowable."²⁵ He criticizes Platonic theory and its Christian descendants who assess the physical world as a pale reflection of a non-material sphere of perfect forms, beautiful but remote. He extols the physical world itself as "epiphanic," revealing the beauty of its own being, and potentially the beauty of the Creator.²⁶

Balthasar argues that beauty is a transcendent experience, inherent in human sensibility and operative in every culture.²⁷ He is clear that his understanding of beauty is not that of popular culture. However, to bring his theological aesthetics into wider conversation, further clarity is helpful. Though beauty can be thought of as a transcendental or universal category, we experience it immanently, in a particular work of art, piece of music, presence of a person, scene of nature, balance and order of thought, and so on. Our experiences of beauty, even though they can transport us beyond ourselves, are in the first place particular to our time, place, and culture.

24 Hans Urs von Balthasar's theory of beauty closely follows Wolfgang von Goethe's theory of natural forms, which espouses a unity between outward expression and inward spiritual truth in all things and persons. Both authors react against Platonic dualism and Enlightenment rationalism. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 339–86.

25 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory I: The Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 17.

26 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory II: The Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59. This approach produced a theology of aesthetics in Balthasar's work.

27 In this sense, Balthasar's theology of aesthetics is an existential development of the medieval theological/philosophical transcendentals of being and beauty. See Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011), especially chapter 1: "Balthasar and the Transcendentals."

The particular context of Balthasar's theologizing is mid-to-late-twentieth-century Europe, and specifically the German Catholic intellectual and religious world. To appropriate his theology of beauty for conversation with those who come from very different worlds, it is important to maintain a certain vigilance about his theological methodology, to ensure that it does not limit his concept of beauty to his particular, post-colonial European Christian world. Does his theology allow and encourage epiphanies of transcendent beauty in other very different forms of Christianity across the globe and throughout its history? Furthermore, does his theology allow and encourage the same openness to alterity beyond Christianity? To keep the conversation hospitable for others, the theologian must maintain a certain heuristic or (to invoke Kwok Piu-lan) suspicious stance toward the theology under discussion.²⁸

Balthasar locates the genesis of transcendent beauty in an archetypal, universal encounter: an infant's relationship with its mother. It is the original symbol and nascent grace of our pervasive, lifelong experience of the mystery of being. A mother's love, or the love of a primary caregiver, co-creates the child's awareness and emergence of self and thereby stirs its innate capacity for knowledge and love. This *agape* love slowly transforms potency to act, orienting the child to an ever-unfolding discovery of the world. "[So] does love awaken love; it is in the movement toward the 'Thou' [the mother] that the 'I' [the child] becomes aware of itself. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers it space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit."²⁹

This original movement, the experience of being loved into being human, is paradigmatic for our ever-evolving selves. Just as love is at the origin of our becoming a self, so, too, love is at the origin of every act of knowing, as the beauty of the known draws us into relationship with its being. "Herein lies the aesthetic reality of all things: in being truly themselves

28 Anne M. Carpenter, "Balthasar Beyond European Modernity: Rethinking *Herrlichkeit* through its Precursors," *Modern Theology* 37, No. 3 (July 2021), 616–36. Carpenter traces the tension in Balthasar's writings between the limitations and the advantages of his late modern, Eurocentric German theology and his openness to non-European cultures. She finds his standpoint "open—in its own terms, by its own logic—to a standpoint other than Europe (636)." This question extends to all manner of theologizing: what is its relationship to culture, both to the culture from which it has arisen and by which it has been formed, as well as to the alterity of other Christian and non-Christian cultures?

29 Hans Urs von Balthasar "Movement Toward God," *Explorations in Theology, III: Creator Spirit*, trans. B. McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 15–55.

in their naturalness they become numinous vessels of worldly beauty as it reveals and conceals itself, playfully enticing us into an exploratory relationship with its depths.”³⁰

Although Balthasar’s spirituality of beauty remains attractive for dialogue across religious and spiritual difference, it arises out and remains deeply rooted in his Christian faith. His description of the universal human potential for a spiritual life builds upon two Christian doctrines: Incarnation and Trinity.³¹ The beauty revealed and concealed in every instance and at every moment of creation is the beauty of the Eternal Logos through whom all things were made and have their being (Jn. 1:1-4; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:3). The revelation of God in Christ discloses this truth about the world; reason on its own struggles to apprehend it. Faith surpasses logic, inviting us to adoration and obedience to the divine that pervades all creation with its beauty. Inspired by faith, we come to know that our encounter with the world and its divine origin is an encounter with the Trinity, and an invitation into its inner life of infinite love. This is Christian spirituality, or as von Balthasar called it, Christian mystagogy.³²

Balthasar insists that theology and spirituality must be intricately linked. Rightly conceived, they both open the heart to God.³³ Theology brings “the infinite riches of divine truth into the finite vessels in which revelation is given to us, so that the believer may be made capable of encountering this infinity in adoration and active obedience.”³⁴ The spiritual or mystagogical life of the Christian is lived in light of the existential implications of the core

30 Kevin Mongrain, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, eds. Lewis Ayers and Medi-Ann Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 735.

31 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” *Explorations in Theology, I: the Word Made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littlewood and A. Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 197–201.

32 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 197–201.

33 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 208. Balthasar laments that “scientific” theology became more and more divorced from prayer, and so lost the accent and tone with which one should speak of what is holy, while “affective” theology, as it became increasingly empty, often degenerated into “unctuous, platitudinous piety.” He understood Christian spirituality as “the subjective aspect of dogmatic theology.” See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Spirituality,” in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 211. The four volumes in Balthasar’s *Explorations* provide a valuable summary of his theology of spirituality.

34 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Place of Theology,” *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, 152.

Christian doctrines of creation, revelation, incarnation, resurrection, and trinity. Scripture, sacrament, and charity inform the inner life and devotional practices of the Christian. Meditation on the Word of God enlightens the mind, heart, and soul of the believer and is an ever-unfolding invitation at the heart of Christian spiritual life. The sacraments provide regular ritual expressions that celebrate and effect divine grace for the sanctification of the person. In von Balthasar's understanding, the fullness of a spiritual life is lived within the Church, its scriptures, sacraments, and its communal service of love and justice to the needs and challenges in the surrounding world.³⁵

Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner's approach to spirituality reflects his own theological anthropology, which differs from von Balthasar's.³⁶ His transcendental method locates the heart of being human not in a personal encounter with the mystery of creation and its inherent beauty as von Balthasar elaborates. Rather, he describes what he calls a pre-conceptual awareness of our capacity to know and to love. In Rahner's analysis of human knowledge and volition, before we "know" something, that is, before we can name, objectify, categorize, and explain any part of our experience, we have an *a priori* awareness of our very capacity for knowledge, of our potential to know. Before we "love" something or someone, that is before we affirm the being, goodness, and value of any object of our knowledge, we have an *a priori* awareness of our capacity for love, our potential to affirm.³⁷

35 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality of the Church," *Spirituality in Church and World*, Concilium Vol. 9, trans. Theodore Westow, ed. Christian Duquoc (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), 7–24.

36 The similarities and differences between Rahner and von Balthasar are well known. Those very differences recommend them as two different exemplars of spirituality in this study. Cf. Karen Kilby, "Balthasar and Karl Rahner," *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, S. J. and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 18. Also, Vincent Holzer, "Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Twentieth-Century Catholic Currents on the Trinity," *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 22.

37 I realize that my use of the term "aware" or "awareness" to describe Rahner's *a priori* dimension of our human experience is equivocal or ambiguous. Rahner's *a priori* "awareness" is a "pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, and un-thematic experience of the openness of the human person toward absolute mystery," to quote from Daniel P. Horan, "A Rahnerian Response to Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age,'" *New Blackfriars*, 95:1055 (January 2014), 21–42, especially

Rahner's idea of *a priori*, pre-categorical awareness requires some elaboration. When something comes within the range and scope of our senses, our imagination, or our mind, it stimulates and invites us to perceive, acknowledge, and understand the reality before us: to know it, name it, and think about it, and at the same time to value it and cherish our knowledge of it. When we encounter an object, that is, anything outside of ourselves, it activates our potential to know and love.

Rahner invites us to reflect on our readiness, our capacity which precedes any encounter, namely, our *potential* for knowledge and love, what he calls the subject's *Vorgriff*, a German word best translated as "pre-apprehension." He affirms and names that nebulous, but ubiquitous, passive potential for knowledge and love as a constitutive dimension of our human nature, an essential part of who we are. Even though Rahner names it or "categorizes" this aspect of our human nature with the word *Vorgriff*, he advises that we cannot objectify it and "know" it as we know everything else. However, it is constitutive of our human nature. In that *a priori* awareness, we dwell at the very limit of our existence. We stand on the frontier of our human experience, where the horizon of our potential for knowing and loving extends endlessly in every direction.³⁸

In that ceaseless "pre-apprehension" of all knowing and all willing, Rahner locates and identifies our pre-reflexive encounter with Infinite Mystery. Our limitless and nameless openness to knowing and to loving constitutes the mystery of our humanity, which by its very nature is oriented to Infinite Mystery, which Rahner identifies with God.³⁹ In this pre-reflexive openness to infinite knowing and loving, our human nature encounters God. Rahner calls this the "supernatural existential," the *a priori* graced experience of being human that is intrinsic and constitutive. It is a constant offer of grace, universal among all human beings. It is ever prior to God's

41, note 70. However, to be at all useful, this *a priori* experience must involve "awareness" at some level of the human person. My approach suggests a Jamesian reading of Rahner.

38 For later presentations by Rahner of his notion of *a priori* awareness and its constitutive role in human experience see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 34–5, 52–8.

39 Rahner elaborated this universal dynamism of the intellect toward God in his first work *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). Our capacity for endless knowing and loving remains always *in posse*, that is, as potential. God's love and knowledge are *in esse*, that is, as actual and infinite. We are limited creatures who are, nonetheless, in God's image.

self-communication insofar as it is received and expressed in the testimonies of sacred texts and religious traditions.⁴⁰

Rahner's theological anthropology, then, claims that our human nature is constitutively open to relationship with Infinite Mystery, with God. In that sense, we are all "naturally religious." Our primordial encounter with the divine is conceived in the womb of our human capacity to know and to love. Divine grace, or the loving-self donation of God is the hidden life within us, to which scriptural revelation and the incarnation of the Word of God in Christ give voice and affirmation.⁴¹ Religion, with its words, symbols, rituals and narratives, names a deeper spiritual reality hidden in the origins of human consciousness and the structure of human existence, which by nature is "spirit in the world."

The heart of Rahner's theology can be described as "apophatic," that is, a theology that admits the Divine is transcendent to any human words, names, or categories, religious or otherwise. For we do not encounter God directly, as one categorical object among others, but only "in the mode of withdrawal, of silence, of distance, of being always inexpressible, so that speaking of it, if it is to make sense, always requires listening to its silence."⁴² This is a difficult, ascetical theology, requiring much disciplined study, meditation, and contemplation. It identifies a "mysticism of everyday life," in that the Divine pervades and sustains all dimensions of human experience.⁴³ Those who interpret and comment on Rahner's spirituality often do so through the categories and practices of Ignatian spirituality in ways that provide more hospitable access to the spiritual implications of his theology.⁴⁴

His value as a theological participant in conversations with those who identify as spiritual but not religious is self-evident. Rahner affirms that the Absolute Mystery we call God extends Itself in Infinite Love to every human in the human transcendent experience of pre-conceptual awareness,

40 Horan, 33–4.

41 One could also claim the voices and affirmations of other religious traditions as revelatory, though each in different ways. See Stephen Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, Declan Marmion and Mary Hines, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On page 46 he writes, "...the grace of God's self-offer is not the exclusive privilege of Christians."

42 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 64.

43 Harvey D. Egan, "The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner," *The Way* 52:2 (April 2013), 43–62, especially 45.

44 For an extensive commentary see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also, his *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

of our abiding potential as knowers and lovers.⁴⁵ God, as it were, meets all human beings in their infinite potential for knowledge and love. For Rahner God's grace is "always and everywhere present at the very heart of human existence."⁴⁶

Many Christians find Rahner's supernatural existential too amorphous or too universal, such that it detracts or distracts from the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Rahner's understanding of spirituality is rooted in his faith in Jesus Christ, the self-communication of God in history and creation, the "Logos in the act of uttering itself into the non-divine."⁴⁸ According to Rahner, to be human is to be radically oriented to God, to the Infinite Mystery beyond all knowing and loving. This mystery of radical orientation to the Divine is fully realized and revealed in Christ, the Eternal Word made flesh. Amidst the universal pneumatology of the Absolute Mystery in all creation and history, Christians respond to the final and full revelation of the Divine in Jesus. Faith in Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, inspire a holistic spirituality that affirms the union of the divine and human, and that affirms the remarkable diversity of world Christianity with humility and openness to God's prevenient Spirit in so many cultural and linguistic expressions.⁴⁹ Scripture, sacrament, prayer, and loving service for justice and peace characterize the lived spirituality of Christian believers. Rahner predicted that beyond cultural identification, legal observance, and church membership, a deep spirituality born of faith in Christ as Encounter with Infinite Mystery would become more and more essential for the Christian of the future.⁵⁰

45 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 144–48.

46 Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Worship," *Faith and Ministry: Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1983), 143.

47 Henry Shea, "Internal Difficulties in the Theology of Karl Rahner," *Modern Theology* 37:3 (July 2021), 637–661.

48 Karl Rahner, "Christology in the Setting of Modern Man's Understanding of Himself and His World," *Theological Investigations: Confrontations* 11, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 220.

49 Robert Masson, "Spirituality for the Head, Heart, Hands, and Feet: Rahner's Legacy," *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*, Marquette University, Winter 1984, 207. Available at https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1206&context=theo_fac

50 He famously wrote, "The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic"... or will cease to be anything at all." Karl Rahner "Christian living formerly and today," *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life: Theological Investigations* 7, trans. David Bourke (New York: Dartner, Longman/Herder, 1971), 15. See also "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations* 20, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1981), 143–53.

The writings of von Balthasar and Rahner provide two theological approaches to spirituality. Building on the foundation of their Christian anthropologies, each examines spirituality as a lived response to divine revelation in history and creation. We might note a significant difference between the potential “universal spiritualities” that abide in their anthropologies. Rahner’s God is experienced in the “withdrawal, silence and distance” of pre-conceptual, *a priori* awareness. The spirituality associated with his anthropology suggests an affinity with apophatic mysticism that finds no words or categories adequate to name encounter with the Divine in *a priori* experience. His *Vorgriff* seems more at home in the spirituality of the anonymous medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

By contrast, von Balthasar’s God lovingly confronts one with inexpressible, overwhelming beauty in created things, and in our direct, objective encounter with them and their categorical beauty. Two very different kinds of Christian anthropologies that potentially offer two different kinds of universal spirituality.⁵¹

Both theologians, in different ways, situate Christian spirituality in the wider context of the universal human search for meaning. Whether confessional or universal, theological definitions of spirituality assume faith in a transcendent being, which serves as the foundation for theory. The assumption of a transcendent Divine Being who has reached out to offer love and relationship is operative for both von Balthasar and Rahner. To ascribe an emergent universal spirituality to either one of these theologians requires the assumption of a personal God who self-discloses. Despite their different interpretations of the spiritual *Ursprung* for humanity—beauty or *a priori* awareness—they both affirm that divine revelation provides the foundation upon which they build their theologies of spirituality, and the ends toward which a spiritual life is directed.

Anticipating conversation with those who identify as spiritual but not religious, one might expect that James’ philosophical-psychological approach to spiritual experience would have greater appeal to them. We might assume that James’ explicit avoidance of “theology or ecclesiasticism” offers a sensibility they find more hospitable, less judgmental. One might also

51 One might be tempted to compare Rahner’s spirituality with that of Jnana Yoga, and von Balthasar’s with that of Bhakti Yoga; fruitful topics for exploration in Comparative Theology. See Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 24–40; also “The emerging field of comparative theology: a review of recent books (1989-95),” *Theological Studies* 56:3 (1995), 521–50.

imagine that spiritual but not religious persons would prefer and prioritize what we have called the universal spiritualities inherent in the anthropologies von Balthasar and Rahner, over the more confessional underpinnings of their theologies. But not necessarily. Much depends on how people who see themselves as spiritual but not religious understand religion and its various components, and whether they have foreclosed any consideration of a transcendent reality.⁵²

Part Three: Religion

A search for definitions of religion yields at least as many results as one for spirituality.⁵³ There are some well-known definitions. As we have seen, James understood religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”⁵⁴ Alfred North Whitehead also emphasized solitude: “Religion is what the individual does with his solitariness.”⁵⁵ In his definition, Emil Durkheim elaborated the more social and ecclesial or communal elements of religion: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”⁵⁶ Paul Tillich opted for a more existential definition of religion that could also serve as a definition of spirituality. In his classic text, *Dynamics of Faith*, he described religion as the state of “being grasped by an ultimate concern,” a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.⁵⁷

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- 52 Robert C. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) explores “naturalized” spirituality, which draws from philosophical and religious ideas, but eschews any hint of divine revelation or relationship.
- 53 See Anna King and Paul Hedges, “What Is Religion, Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?” in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, vol 1, ed. Paul Hedges (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2014), 1–30, especially 22–4.
- 54 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961), 42.
- 55 Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University Press; 2nd edition, 1996), 17.
- 56 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: Oxford World Classics*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.
- 57 Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith: Perennial Classics* (New York: Harper One, 2009), xvii, 1–4, 11.

In his classic text, *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith teased out several “understandings” of religion: “the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos enter human life;”⁵⁸ “a way of life woven around a people’s ultimate concerns;”⁵⁹ and “the world’s wisdom traditions,”⁶⁰ among others. In their definitions and descriptions of religion, Paul Tillich and Huston Smith both advocate more generous integrations of religion and spirituality. Indeed, Smith’s life project, one could argue, was to promote that integration by exploring the mystical and spiritual dimensions of religious practice around the world. That project distinguished his work among scholars of religion.⁶¹

In a dated but still compelling article, Thomas Idinopulos expressed his frustration with the definitions of religion produced by his fellow social scientists in the field of the History of Religions. Such definitions, which focus on the observable elements in religion such as “historical knowledge of the rituals, mythologies, religious communities, ideas, teachings, institutions, arts, architecture,” are inherently limited because they fail to recognize that “religion is not exhausted by the observable.”⁶² In addition, the sheer number and diversity of the cultural, linguistic, and geographical aspects of religions, cults, sects, denominational variations, and spiritual movements are “bewildering,” when one strives to arrive at a satisfactory definition.⁶³ There is another dimension to the reality and the experience of religion, which Idinopulos, like Smith, considered essential. He identified it as “the unobservable, which is the source of religion’s purpose and meaning.”⁶⁴ If Idinopulos were writing today, he might call it the spiritual dimension of religion. However, his question remains. Is it possible to capture the inexhaustible essence of religion amidst such diversity of form and expression and reach a satisfactory definition?

Richard Comstock questioned the usefulness of any essential definition of religion that professes to be complete, closed, self-contained, and a final description or delineation of the topic. As an alternative, he proposed what he called “open” definitions. This approach to definition assumes “an open process that not only allows but requires connections and clarifications with

58 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 9.

59 Smith, 183.

60 Smith, 5, 386–90.

61 Smith, 2–11.

62 Thomas A. Idinopulos, “What Is Religion?” *CrossCurrents* Vol. 48, No. 3 (Fall 1998), 366.

63 Idinopulos, 367.

64 Idinopulos, 367.

other texts to achieve specificity.”⁶⁵ Open definitions or descriptions remain heuristic or provisional. They invite other perspectives, engage in continuous dialectic, and expect the unfolding of successive syntheses that allow ever-greater understanding. As such, they require a certain asceticism in practice and humility in method.⁶⁶

To achieve that aim, and to avoid any “closed” definition of religion that might discourage dialogue, it is more helpful to identify three major elements of religion, elements which can help illustrate the various ways in which people embrace, ignore, or object to its teachings and practice. They are creed, code, and cult: what to believe; how to behave; and what and how to worship.⁶⁷ These three elements do not have equal importance in every religion, and they may be quite uneven in the religious practice of individuals at different times in their lives. However, they can function as axes that expose various reasons people distance themselves from religion today. When a person says, “I am spiritual but not religious,” does that declaration involve a wholesale dismissal of all three of these elements of religion? Or, upon reflection, might the skeptic admit the value of one or two of the elements—and their covert influence or even occasional overt practice in their lives? Let us take a brief look at each of these three elements.

Creed, Cult, and Moral code

Christianity is a creedal religion. Over the centuries, it has evolved a set of doctrines or teachings that it asks its adherents to embrace. Indeed, in many denominations, worshippers proclaim the essential doctrines of their faith every week in the liturgical recitation of a creed. For many who identify as spiritual but not religious, the latter half of that label refers specifically to their rejection of one or more doctrines. The doctrines they cannot accept may be among those most central to faith in the Mystery of Christ, such as Incarnation, Resurrection, and Trinity. Or, their objection may be to teachings that are important but not central, such as certain passages in

65 W. Richard Comstock, “Toward Open Definitions of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1986), 514.

66 Von Balthasar also counseled humility in any attempt to define either religion or spirituality. “No mission, no spirituality, is capable of being defined in its living center. They all come from the infinite variety of the divine life, which always exceeds the compass of the human.” Von Balthasar, ‘Spirituality’ (1989), 226.

67 Sandra Schneiders elaborates these three elements in “Religion vs. Spirituality: a Contemporary Conundrum,” *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005), 169–70.

Scripture, questions about evolution, devotion to saints, veneration of sacred objects, the role of Mary Mother of Jesus, certain liturgical practices, a clerical priesthood or ministry, and so forth. Because their religious education has not provided them with any insight about the nature of doctrine, they do not discriminate among the hierarchy of truths.⁶⁸ Deprived of the opportunity to learn more about authentic teaching, people default to the designation “not religious,” even though they may continue to believe in the existence of a loving, personal God who has revealed Himself in Christ. With regard to creed or doctrine, then, there can be a great variety of church teachings that former or struggling members find untenable, and for a variety of reasons.⁶⁹

Moral teachings may also lead people to leave a religion. A church’s ethical teachings send them fleeing into the “spiritual but not religious” camp. As with doctrine, there is a hierarchy of ethical teachings that can vary across different denominations, and even within the same denomination depending on national and local ecclesiastical emphases.⁷⁰ The 1968 Vatican

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- 68 Avery Dulles, “The Hierarchy of Truths in the Catechism,” *The Thomist* 58:3 (July 1994), 369-388. Also, Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Revelation” chapter 9 in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*. Richard R. Gaillardetz, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. See Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism-Unitatis Redintegratio*, #11. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #36; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
- 69 In Judaism and Islam, doctrine plays much less of a role, even no role depending on how one parses the difference between faith and law. Each of these two Abrahamic religions affirms a foundational belief in the oneness of God, an adherence to certain prophetic revelations, and the all-important observance of revealed Law—Torah or Sharia. Affirmation of the One God transmutes immediately into moral code, which holds the primacy. Consequently, Jewish or Muslim spirituality is always in relationship to divine law. Even the mysticisms of the Kabbalists and Sufis evolved from Torah or Sharia respectively, although in different ways and with different emphases.
- 70 The recent Vatican permission for non-liturgical blessings of gay couples is a good example of how different local and regional churches accept and interpret what is perceived as morally acceptable. Cindy Wooden, ‘Doctrinal Dicastery explains how, when gay couples can be blessed,’ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, December 2023. <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/doctrinal-dicastery-explains-how-when-gay-couples-can-be-blessed>.

document, *Humane Vitae*, prohibited birth control and caused many Catholics to leave the church for other denominations, or to abandon religion altogether. Others remain in the church but disagree with the teaching.⁷¹ The cultural and political turmoil around abortion, assisted dying, in vitro fertilization, and other health care issues sends many people toward the exit of the church. Alternatively, teachings on social justice, immigration, women's issues, and sexual difference have alienated other members of many denominations. As with doctrine, a lack of discrimination regarding the relative weight of moral teachings leads to confusion and alienation, and often the adoption of the "not religious" trope.

Cult can be the primary religious identification for many people. Christians may be ambivalent or ignorant about questions of doctrine. They may disagree with particular moral teachings. However, if they continue to attend worship regularly or even occasionally, that involvement may be enough for them to remain identified with their religion. Because they engage at important times and on poignant occasions with their religious community's ritual and worship, they may continue their religious and spiritual lives within their community of faith.

Mapping spirituality onto the religious grid of creed, cult, and code may provide helpful distinctions for the spiritual but not religious regarding their actual relationship with religion. However, this is not an easy exercise. The spiritual color, texture, or ethos identified with a religion emerge organically from the many ways creed, cult, and code intertwine in religious observance. How one's religion integrates or identifies with local, regional, or national culture is another factor in how people negotiate relationship with their religious community.⁷² For those who remain members of a religion, these three elements will take on different levels of importance at different stages of their lives. One or another of the three elements may also be an important part of an adherent's spiritual life. Whatever the particular

71 Caryle Murphy, "What is a sin: Catholics don't always agree with their church," Pew Research Center, September 25, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/2eh7rf2f>.

72 In Asian cultures, there is more fluidity in religious identification and practice, where people "...did not belong to any specific 'religion' (itself not a native term) but moved freely between the utilization of resources and ideas by each of the main and lesser traditions (i.e. Confucian social mores, Daoist rituals, Buddhist death rites, folk religion practices)." See Paul Hodges, "Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation," *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (January 2022), 30. Hodges speaks of a "shared religious landscape" across Eastern cultures. Such religious and cultural fluidity seems to be growing in the West.

circumstances, conversations across difference will remain hospitable and more fruitful when participants continue to take account of the complexity of what people on all sides of the issue understand by the terms “religion” and “religious.” Sensibility to that complexity is essential to the paradigm of hospitality developed here.

**Part Four: Listening to the Spiritual but not Religious:
A Hermeneutical Approach**

Theologian Sandra Schneiders suggests an approach to the study of spirituality that is not only beyond the social science and theological approaches as elaborated above, but also beyond different understandings or definitions of religion. She describes her approach as hermeneutical.⁷³ Her primary focus and starting point is the experience of the person. That experience informs and guides her hermeneutical methodology. Questions are primary, not theories, traditions, communities, categories, or definitions. What has emerged in a person’s life that they might identify as spiritual? As religious? What was the experience like? In what did it consist? What has led a person to consider themselves spiritual, but not religious? What do those terms mean to them? The hermeneutical method is more inductive. It starts with the experience of the subject, not with any explicit sociological, theological, or religious classification, or even with the very distinction between spiritual and religious. It does not employ theory in a way that preempts experience. Nor does it rush to conclusions that foreclose conversation.

A hermeneutical approach involves a patient, careful process of reflecting on the various aspects and dimensions of a person’s experience, allowing description to emerge in conversation and dialogue.⁷⁴ Guided

73 Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005), 49-60. Schneiders’ emphasis on the methodological importance of experience in the study of spirituality is developed by Rossano Zas Friz De Col, “Christian Spirituality and Spiritual Theology in a Pluralistic World,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16:2A (Fall 2016), 118–135.

74 To elucidate this approach, Kwok Piu-Lan invokes the meaning of dialogue in Chinese as “mutuality active listening, and openness to what one’s partner has to say.” Kwok Piu-Lan, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, 537. Schneiders acknowledges the contributions of feminist scholars to her elaboration of the hermeneutical approach, specifically Elizabeth Johnson. See Schneiders, “A

by careful attention and attentive care, this method moves slowly, even hesitantly, in the attempt to understand an experience through thoughtful analysis and heuristic applications of language, ideas, and perhaps theories. Abstractions are consistently tested against experience for their adequacy in understanding the experience. After extended listening and tentative critical analysis, the third step in Schneiders' hermeneutical approach is constructive. It builds a description, an understanding, an interpretation of experience that allows the experience to be appreciated, discussed, and shared, enriching all involved. Nonetheless, the theoretical categories or distinctions arrived at and agreed upon remain provisional, more like a nomad's tent than a settled dwelling.⁷⁵

Hermeneutical sensitivity can be integrated into both theological and social science methods. It can entertain theology's embrace of faith as well as social scientific humanistic categories. It can help sort through religious questions about doctrine, morality, and forms of worship. In any case, the distinctive contribution of the hermeneutical method is to insist on the precedence of experience, and to mitigate a deductive process that involves a haste to name and tame experience by premature imposition of theory or category. Theologians bring theological language, categories, and theories into the conversation. Psychologists bring psychological language, categories, and theories. Sociologists their own, and so forth. Hermeneutical sensitivity moves theory, definition, and categorization into the background, and invites people to bring their lived experience to the foreground.

The hermeneutical approach is not naïve or agnostic about theory or assumptions. It calls for keen awareness of definitions, language, and categories that always attend and inform the work of any scholar or conversation partner. No one enters conversation theoretically, culturally, or linguistically denuded. Even as we struggle through the initial step of listening to the other, no effort to bracket theory or concept is ever completely successful. Complete objectivity in the study of spirituality or any phenomenon is unrealistic and undesirable, as Gadamer has demonstrated.⁷⁶

Hermeneutical Approach," 54. See also Susan Rakoczy, "Trusting Experience: The Foundation of Feminist Spirituality," *Religion and Theology* 18 (2011), 32–55. There are strong parallels with Heinz Kohut's understanding of empathy in psychoanalytic self-psychology. Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* ed. Arnold Goldberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

75 Note the similarities between Schneiders' hermeneutical approach and Comstock's "open definition."

76 Gadamer, 282. Gadamer himself was a 20th philosopher who while not religious in any conventional sense prized the spiritual dimensions of the person. He provides

However, Schneider's use of hermeneutics in her approach to the study of spirituality opens the door to a more in-depth consideration of conversation across spiritual and religious difference and ensures a deep hospitality of mind and heart among participants.

Conclusion

The conversation about spiritual but not religious is part of the contemporary changes which the Church is witnessing in most if not all its denominations. We might even call the extent and nature of these changes epochal.⁷⁷ They include significant shifts in how the church understands and teaches doctrine, how it applies moral principles amidst scientific progress, and how it worships in a shrinking world where intercultural and interreligious encounter is more the norm than the exception. Radical changes in society, such as those wrought by information technology, artificial intelligence, social media, and virtual presence inevitably impinge on creed, moral code, and cherished cult, and propel many people, both religious and not, into existential crises. We cannot ignore the acceleration of both societal and ecclesial changes, with their pervasive consequences on rising generations who are the church's future.⁷⁸

Nostalgic retreat to the comfort of familiar religious observance and doctrinal security may provide temporary and occasionally necessary respite from the "future shock" of contemporary change and challenge. However, there is also need for creative, constructive paradigms for engaging in dialogue with the many people for whom religious doctrine, moral teaching, or worship have lost their efficacy. This article proposes such an approach, characterized by the four sensibilities elaborated above to create abiding hospitality to all participants in the dialogue.

an early and erudite example of the contemporary "spiritual but not religious" philosopher. See Jessica Frazier, *Gadamer on Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2023). Also, Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016), 5–26.

77 Phyllis Tickle presents an interesting analysis in *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

78 Jean M. Twenge, *I-Gen* (New York: Atria, 2017), 119ff. Twenge warns that those born since 1995, identified as Gen-Z, who have grown up with smartphones as a part of their daily lives, present as "neither spiritual nor religious." The generational characteristics of Gen-Z are a worldwide phenomenon, given the ubiquity of the technology. Research on Generation Alpha, born since 2010, is just beginning.

This paradigm acknowledges the value of social scientific analyses of change. William James offered an early example of such an approach. At the same time, it encourages theological wisdom to discern what might be useful from “what is old and what is new (Matt. 13:52) in the Christian tradition.” What we have called “universal spiritualities” nestled in the Christian anthropologies of theologians such as von Balthasar and Rahner can enrich the dialogue in two ways. They can help religious adherents deepen their religious devotion as well as increase their understanding of the faith they profess. At the same time, these theologies can serve as invitations to spiritual but not religious persons to reflect on existential questions and quotidian struggles in light of useful insights drawn from the reflections of serious Christian thinkers. Such “universal spiritualities” can provide a common language for dialogue across difference and a vocabulary more adequate to the complexity of religion and the many ways it intersects with spirituality.

The fourth sensibility of the paradigm is the appeal for hermeneutical humility. The importance of questioning over arguing, of seeking over assuming, and of learning over teaching sets a context within which social-psychological changes can be considered, theological reflections entertained, and the complexity of religion recognized, without losing respect for the deeply felt experience that participants bring into the encounter.

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