

Discipleship and Spirituality from a Christian Perspective

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Published online: 8 July 2008
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Abstract Spirituality is an important aspect of being a human. One may approach this topic from a purely psychological or religious perspective. In this paper, it is argued that spirituality as defined from a purely psychological perspective is inadequate to capture the depth of this human experience because it misses the core of spirituality—discipleship. Following Foster’s (1998) *Streams of Living Water*, it will be argued that discipleship is the core of Christian spirituality, and each of these streams provides an important context for fostering one’s relationship to the transcendent.

Keywords Discipleship · Spirituality · Christian spirituality

This article will briefly review some of the literature pertaining to spirituality and its relationship to mental health. The focus of this review will be to discuss the highly personal, individual, and subjective elements constructive of modern and postmodern understandings and appropriations of spirituality. Essentially from a “secular” or not necessarily religious perspective, one’s spirituality entails understanding, emotional experience, and personal spiritual practices. This secular spirituality will be contrasted with Christian spirituality that has at its core discipleship. Following Foster (1998), six traditions that emphasize different dimensions of discipleship will be developed. These six traditions provide a Christian understanding (content), experience, and both personal and communal practices that tie Christians into a larger, transcendent context—the Kingdom of God.

Spirituality: a psychological perspective

Spirituality considers how an individual lives and practices transcendent beliefs at its most basic and generic form. Spirituality may be concerned with a particular religious affiliation, but it need not to. Walsh (1999) defines it this way: “Spirituality, an overarching construct,

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refers more generally to transcendent beliefs and practices” (p. 6). As such, spirituality is more concerned with lived, individual experiences. Spirituality, as a resource for clinicians, may connect one to a faith community and provide a subculture for understanding and explaining one’s experience (Walsh 1999). Similarly, spirituality may be thought of as one’s subjective experience “that is identified with such things as faith commitments, behavior consistent with beliefs, personal transcendence, supraconscious sensitivity, and meaningfulness” (Moberg 2001, p. 18).

Within the marriage and family therapy (MFT) domain, Doherty (1999) critiques the field of spirituality and family therapy as having: (a) definition issues of spirituality, (b) individualistic definitions of spirituality, (c) lack of attention on spiritual practices in families, (d) disconnect between spirituality and morality, and (e) lack of discussion regarding the use of spiritual language in therapy. These are persistent issues that prevail yet today.

An interesting approach to spirituality and MFT is Coffey’s (2003) theory of spirituality. He identifies the integrative and trans-theoretical dimensions of spirituality through his use of four inter-related “revolutions” in MFT: intersubjective, subjective, objective, and interobjective. Intersubjective refers to the relationship dimension. Subjective refers to the individual psychology and perspective. Objective refers to the genetic, medical facts of one’s somatic existence. Finally, Interobjective refers to the fit between one and one’s environment. That is, the relationship between the intersubjective and the other three dimensions in space and time. Spirituality from Coffey’s perspective provides a dimension of transformation and assessment that MFTs may utilize in treatment. It is subversive to the purely medical and cybernetic approaches to treating individuals and families as it addresses several of the dimensions listed above. In a sense, Coffey argues that spirituality is an *integrative process* in therapy.

The trend from a psychological perspective indicates that spirituality is important—although this is a fairly recent development (Wulff 1996)—but it maintains the division between spirituality on the one hand and a specific religious tradition on the other (Moberg 2001; Richards and Bergin 2000; Wulff 1996). For the most part, spirituality is seen as permeating and transcending religious preferences and practices. Also, a spiritual individual may not necessarily belong to a specific religious organization (Hoge 1996). Religion is often thought of as participation in specific organizations that congregate to educate, nurture, and practice a specific belief set (Moberg 2001).

From a psychological perspective, spirituality can be utilized to aid treatment. Walsh (1999) includes spirituality in: (a) assessment, (b) improving relationship networks, and (c) the ultimate meaning clients give to suffering and pain. Another important aspect of spirituality is how it relates to peoples from diverse cultures (see, e.g., Tan and Dong 2000; Trujillo 2000).

Spirituality is also seen as an important coping mechanism for sufferers (Pargament 1996). Pargament (1996) views spirituality and religion as serving two important functions. Conservation concerns the maintenance of a particular worldview or meaning framework regarding a particular crisis. “Conservational coping involves attempts to preserve or protect significance in the face of threat challenge or loss” (Pargament 1996, p. 217). Conservational coping strategies include (Pargament 1996): (a) prevention from religious institutions—institutions place firm boundaries around group membership thus conserving the group’s identity, (b) support—groups for mutual support, (c) ritual purification—an individual’s sins are forgiven and he or she is cleansed, and (d) reframing—changing the meaning of an event.

Transformative coping strategies involve developing new sources for significance because of inadequate already existing significant objects. Transformational coping strategies are (Pargament 1996): (a) rites of passage and (b) conversion. Pargament describes conversion as:

Be it a spiritual force, a religious group, or humanity, the conversion to the sacred represents a radical transformation, a response to a profound sense of uneasiness with the world, with one's own capacity to deal with the world, and with one's direction for living. (p. 228)

An important implication of Pargament's definition of conversion is the way in which it seemingly transcends all religions. Conversion can be an event for a specific individual who is seemingly disheartened with the ways in which she is living and coping.

In addition to conversion, spirituality is utilized in transformation or therapeutic change (Barrett 1999). Barrett (1999) defines spirituality as "universal and it helps us be aware of our unity" (p. 205). Barrett's conception of spirituality is essentially cognitive and transpersonal. Barrett has a three-stage model that describes the process of fostering change from a spiritual perspective. To begin with, fostering a context for change whereby the therapist and client begin to think about how their individual perspectives are actually constraints, especially in terms of spirituality. The next step in spiritual and therapeutic change concerns understanding and challenging the patterns of behavior and thought that are forming the constraints to personal and spiritual growth. Finally, clients and therapists consolidate therapeutic and spiritual changes gained throughout the therapy.

From Barrett's perspective, spirituality is a universal. As such, Barrett includes many diverse religious practices. For example, Barrett includes transpersonal meditation along side of prayer. Barrett also focuses on how spirituality can actualize the individual, so spiritual practices need not depend upon specific religious traditions.

Along the lines of individual preferences and choices is the connection between transcendent beliefs and *practices*. This specifically ties the transcendent into the ethical (Aponte 2003; Carlson and Erickson 2003). That is, spirituality entails a sense of ethical obligation—what one ought to do in relationship to the transcendent. One's spirituality creates both individual, personal practices, i.e., meditation, scripture reading, prayer, as well as how one is to behave in relationships to others. As therapists, we are still cautioned to take a client centered perspective—it is the client's spirituality and implied ethical system that informs treatment (Doherty 1999). We are cautioned to know and understand personal spiritual resources and struggles and how these might impact the therapeutic relationship (Carlson and Erickson 2003; Griffith and Griffith 2003; Tan and Dong 2000; Trujillo 2000). It seems, ethically speaking, that value imposition and respect for client's autonomy form the narrative context for understanding and using spirituality in therapy.

The trend in psychology and family therapy to value the importance of individual choices and experiences (Downey 1997) is important in understanding how psychology has become more accepting of spirituality. To begin with, "New Age" spirituality has offered an overabundance of choices for individuals who may be tired and abused by more traditional religious forms (Downey 1997). That is, the type of spirituality valued by psychotherapists is highly individualistic, emphasizing personal choice and preferences. This provides for a greater individual choice regarding participation in religious communities. That is, highly individualized spirituality devalues the essential role personal and relational confrontation plays in the life of the spirit. An implication of this type of spirituality correlates one's emotional experience with one's spiritual well being.

As such, personal preferences become more important than maintaining continuity with a specific religious tradition. Valuing personal preferences necessarily transforms spirituality into a psychological experience (Downey 1997). As a result of this "secularization of spirituality," the sacred and challenging aspect of more traditional spiritual disciplines becomes tamed or domesticated—that is, when the spiritual life becomes challenging, one is free to choose a path that is less difficult (Wuthnow 1994/1996).

A final aspect of “secular spirituality” is the importance of valuing religious diversity. Wuthnow (1994/1996) estimates that some 66% of the American population seeks a small group to aid in spirituality. These small groups have purposefully avoided naming and identifying with specific denominational and religious institutions. Also, there becomes more sensitivity to gendered forms of spirituality (Downey 1997) and a call for helping professionals to be sensitive to the diversity of their clientele’s religious preferences (Richards and Bergin 2000).

One could conclude from a purely psychological or relationship perspective that spirituality is an *individual’s* experience with transcendence. That is, spirituality is that aspect of personhood that contains one’s emotional, physical, moral, and cognitive experiences of the divine (broadly defined). Spirituality in this sense transcends beliefs and specific religious traditions. Spirituality is an individual’s experience of transcendence without a narrative understanding of this experience. This view of spirituality divorces it from the narrative context that provides the content and process of spirituality in the lives of individuals.

Spirituality: a Christian perspective

McGrath (1999) suggests that Christian spirituality “concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith” (p. 13). An important assumption from McGrath’s perspective is that spirituality is subsumed under religious life, and not the other way around. That is, religious life determines the ways in which one practices spirituality. An important aspect of Christian spirituality is the diversity of its spiritual practices. One can legitimately speak of Christian *spiritualities*. “[A]ll Christian spirituality must root itself in the word of God, but in the word of God there is no single coherent spirituality but, rather, many spiritualities” (Cunningham and Egan 1996, p. 15).

Some common elements across Christian spiritual traditions include: (a) an action orientation where Christian beliefs are practiced in one’s daily, common existence (Cunningham and Egan 1996; McGrath 1999), (b) the call to *discipleship* where individual Christians are expected to follow Christ’s example of ministry (Bonhoeffer 1959/1995; Cunningham and Egan 1996; Foster 1998; McGrath 1999), and (c) the experience of life together or Christian community (Bonhoeffer 1998, 1954; Cunningham and Egan 1996; McGrath 1999). In this sense, spirituality from a Christian perspective is intimately connected with discipleship.

Discipleship, from a Christian perspective, is concerned with living an authentic Christian existence. As such, Foster (1998) describes six Christian traditions that all Christians should rely upon to live in the Kingdom of God. To begin with:

[w]hen we carefully consider how Jesus lived while among us in the flesh, we learn how we are to live- truly *live-* empowered by him who is with us always even to the end of the age. We then begin an intentional *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ, not in some slavish or literal fashion but by catching the spirit and power in which he lived and by learning to “walk in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). (Foster 1998, p. 3, italics in original)

In other words, learning from the six major Christian traditions allows one to develop a comprehensive view of whom Christ is and what he came to do. From Foster’s (1998) perspective, *imitatio Christi* is discipleship.

The first tradition deals with the contemplative life. “[T]he contemplative life is the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us” (Foster 1998, p. 49). The contemplative life longs for a deeper experience of God’s love. Through prayer, the contemplative one develops a sense of God’s abiding presence. “Through it all, God gradually and slowly ‘captures’ the inner faculties: first the heart and the will, then the mind, the imagination, and the passions” (Foster 1998, p. 51). The emphasis is upon the individual and his or her experience with God.

Discipleship in the contemplative tradition fosters a deeper experience of the divine in the believer’s life. Spiritual disciplines in the contemplative tradition are concerned mainly with prayer. Prayer progresses through several stages (Feiss 1999): (a) *lectio divina*—contemplative Bible reading, (b) *meditation*—reflection, (c) *oratio*—prayer, and finally (d) *contemplation*—contemplation. “The purpose of the contemplative tradition is the development of an abiding sense of God’s presence that is characterized by love, peace, delight, emptiness, passion, and wisdom” (Foster 1998, p. 50).

The second Christian tradition is the holiness tradition. “The Holiness Stream of Christian life and faith focuses upon the inward re-formation of the heart and the development of ‘holy habits’” (Foster 1998, p. 53). The holiness tradition is concerned with living a holy life in the world, as opposed to a spiritual life separate from the world. “[T]he goal of the Christian life is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us” (Foster 1998, p. 85).

“First of all the Holiness Tradition constantly holds before us the ultimate goal of the Christian life: an ever-deeper formation of the inner personality so as to reflect the glory and goodness of God” (Foster 1998, p. 85). The holiness tradition is concerned with actions, observing the laws of God, and behaving in a manner that would please God. Specific disciplines are daily devotions, daily prayer, and constant self-denial of carnal pleasures. The holiness tradition deals with developing a redemptive, Christian response to a fallen, sinful world. Christians know when they enter the kingdom by the fruit they display. Being a Christian means embodying the holy habits (Mat. 7:16).

“The Charismatic Stream of Christian life and faith focuses upon the empowering charisms or gifts of the Spirit and the nurturing fruit of the Spirit” (Foster 1998, p. 99). The charismatic tradition values the Christian’s experience with the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a “threefold function of the charisms of the Spirit: leadership, ecstatic empowerment, and community-building” (Foster 1998, p. 126).

The gifts of the Spirit embody God’s action in the church through pastoral leadership, witnessing via ecstatic expression, and discipleship in terms of community. Discipleship in this tradition fosters a deeper, dynamic, and more spirit-led experience with the divine. The spiritual disciplines in the Charismatic tradition are concerned with experiencing afresh the power of God’s spirit. “‘Signs and wonders,’ miracles and healings, revelations and visions—these are all part of our walk in the spirit” (Foster 1998, p. 129).

“The Social Justice Stream of Christian life and faith focuses upon justice and shalom in all human relationships and social structures” (Foster 1998, p. 137). There are three emphases in the social justice tradition: (a) *misphat* having “social, ethical, and religious connotations” (Foster 1998, p. 168), (b) *hesed* “used in reference to God’s unwavering compassion for his people” (Foster 1998, p. 169), and (c) “*shalom* embodies the vision of a harmonious, all-inclusive community of loving persons” (Foster 1998, p. 171). These emphases give a social, interpersonal dimension to the holiness tradition. Developing a good, just society can become the goal or teleos of society instead of having a redeemed creation that will glorify God.

Discipleship in the social justice tradition entails bringing God's peace and justice to one's local community of faith. The spiritual disciplines from the Social Justice tradition are focused on three central arenas (Foster 1998). The personal arena is concerned with living a life in congruence with peace and justice. The social arena deals with justice in marriage and family life and continues into living just relationships with neighbors. The third arena deals with institutional justice. Christians are called to fight against oppressive social structures and public policies that discriminate.

The fifth tradition of the Christian church is the evangelical tradition that "focuses upon the proclamation of the evangel, the good news of the gospel" (Foster 1998, p. 187). The evangelical tradition focuses upon the *kerygma* or the proclamation that "we no longer have to stand outside, barred from nearness to God by our sin and rebellion" (Foster 1998, p. 219). The central focus of the evangelical tradition is Jesus Christ and his life described in the bible.

Discipleship in the evangelical tradition is Christocentric, focusing upon right Christology or doctrine: this concerns the development and practice of correct doctrine and belief. For the Evangelical tradition, the emphasis of the disciplines is focused on scripture and conversion. There is a call to evangelize the nations, including one's neighbor. There is also a call to honor and esteem the Bible as God's word that is at the heart of the Evangelical tradition (Foster 1998). The Bible is God's truth about God's son being sacrificed for sinners. The Bible confronts all people to enter into a salvific relationship with the only savior, Jesus Christ. It is an Evangelical's responsibility to proclaim the gospel.

The final tradition is the incarnational tradition. The incarnational tradition "focuses upon making present and visible the realm of the invisible spirit" (Foster 1998, p. 237). The incarnational tradition centers upon the embodied expression of Christ through the spirit. The central focus is the churches life together glorifying God in the world (Foster 1998). The sacraments become the most visible forms in the life of the church that demonstrate the invisible God becoming visible in his son. "Sacraments are concrete actions by which we are marked and fed in such a way that the reality of God becomes embedded in our body, our mind, our spirit" (Foster 1998, p. 262).

Discipleship in the incarnational tradition is realized in the material expression of the world through the transformation of ritual into mystical experience. The incarnational tradition is concerned with embodying the presence of Christ to others.

Redeemed by God through Christ, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and experience a growing transformation of character as our bodies come into harmony with our spirit. Hence our embodied self becomes a habitation of the Holy—a tabernacle—where we learn throughout our daily activities to function in cooperation with and in dependence upon God. (Foster 1998, p. 272)

The Incarnational tradition calls one to live in marriage and family relationships, work relationships, and neighborly relationships in order to "lead each member of the community to life everlasting" (Feiss 1999, p. 6).

The six traditions form a narrative context with specific emphases for the spiritual disciplines. The traditions form the ethos that informs specific local congregations that in turn become the social context for individual believers to be disciplined into the Christian community. These larger contexts provide the sense of transcendence that allows for support, nurturance, and self-confrontation that creates a deeper communion with the divine.

The role of Christian community in the "story" of faith fills the content of faith through vocation. More specifically, Christian faith entails living the vocation of being a disciple of and for Christ.

Vocation derives from that profound sense that we are called into existence in this time and this place and among these people for the sake of investing our gifts and potentials in furthering some cause that is of transcending importance. (Fowler 1987, p.32)

Therefore, Christian community is a community of vocation establishing (a) The social nature of the self, (b) Shared loyalty to the community, (c) Shared loyalty to Transcendence, and (d) that Awakens, calls forth, supports, and keeps its members accountable.

From a Christian perspective, spirituality and discipleship can only be understood as part of the larger Christian narrative. As outlined above, the six traditions provide thick content for understanding the Christian's experience with the divine. Spirituality and discipleship are intimately linked—one's spiritual experience draws one deeper into community (communion) with the Christian God who calls believers to be disciples—participate in certain relationships and activities. Spirituality is the process of the individual engaging in a relationship with the divine. Based on the individual's community of faith, the form or content of spirituality is inculcated as individuals seek relationships with the divine.

Christian spirituality is in stark contrast with secular spirituality as outlined above. The six traditions of Christian discipleship ground one in a community that transcends the individual. This community provides a belief set, a narrative framework for understanding spiritual experiences, and most importantly, a community outside of oneself that may confront and support one to develop a deeper, more complete relationship with the Divine. These six traditions provide a Christian understanding (content), experience, and both personal and communal practices that tie Christians into a larger, transcendent context as well as allowing one to understand the diverse metaphors of the Kingdom of God and how to live a life of discipleship, in Foster's (1998) terms, an intentional *imitatio Christi*. The traditions allow one to understand the many relationships the church has had with culture and the world. Christian spirituality, therefore, is about "taking up [one's] cross, and following" the Master (see Mark 8:34).

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