

The Integration of Religion and Spirituality in 21st Century America

Historical Perspectives

Throughout the centuries, there have been countless influences on the spirit of faith. It is a history rich with lives of forefathers and mothers committed to hearing the word and finding the grace of the Divine in their faith. One thought that comes to my mind when I look at history is the dynamic tension between spiritual and physical. It seems to be a constant balancing act to keep the mystery and spirit of God contained within the organization of faith and science.

I have put a brief synopsis of history not only to give some background information to those of you who are interested in the historical aspects of faith and the spirit, but also as a way to review where in history the spiritual and the organizational aspects of faith and spirit struggled with one another. You can see this tension emerge between people seeking the physical and organizational aspects of religion to those people who were seeking the spiritual. How does this dynamic tension affect our religious and spiritual existence?

The Axial Age in Relation to Spiritual Development

Karen Armstrong's discussion of the Axial Age offers us a picture of life at a time that Karl Jasper identifies as the Axial Age. This was a "pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity."¹ This period occurred from around the 900 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E. It was based in four major regions that included China (Confucianism and Taoism), India (Hinduism and Buddhism), Israel (monotheism), and Greece (philosophical rationalism). This was identified as a period where people such as Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah brought about new types of experiences that included intense creativity and spiritual-philosophical experiences. Armstrong suggests that the importance of the period through the ages is that the insights offered during this time "turned back to this period for guidance in times of spiritual and social crisis."² The writers of this time seemed to look more towards an understanding of the core aspects of the human condition and how they related to the divine nature of the universe. The Spirit of life was an important principle of this time.

The Spirit in the Early Church

In the early church, as today, many of the writing were in response to internal church situations or to situations occurring in the external world. In the Patristic period (first to sixth centuries) many of the writings were designed as an opportunity to develop some degree of organization in the church and the way in which it worshiped. The early church questioned how to take a spiritual experience and incorporate it into community worship. Liturgies and doctrines were established and offered up to the general community as a format for expressing spirituality.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation, The Beginning of our Religious Traditions* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), xii.

² *ibid.*

People learned how to relate to the Spirit through these community experiences. The Apostolic Fathers' references to the Holy Spirit were primarily related to a gift of being inspired. The Apologist of this time viewed the Holy Spirit as a part of the triune, and often associated the Spirit in closer relation to Jesus.

Christianity at this time rapidly spread beyond the geographical region of Roman occupied Palestine into the entire Mediterranean area, partially due to imperial trade routes. With the emergence of Christianity into Greek speaking regions, there came an exploration of the relation of spiritual faith to a Greek philosophy, especially with regards to the themes of the writings of Plato.³ In the Greco-Roman world, government and religion functioned together. Christians were persecuted for the worship of the one God in Christ.⁴ This was a time also when doctrines of the church continued to be established. Frequent controversies occurred and several councils were created to resolve difference and bring unity to the community of Christian faith.⁵ In the liturgies there was recognition of the Holy Spirit and the triune relationship of the Divine.

The church spirituality continued to be expressed by the manner of worship in the "holy liturgy"⁶ that became a corporate expression of Christian community. Writings such as the Clementine letters (ninety-fifth century), the Shepherd of Hermes, and the Apologist of the second and third Centuries made contributions to the emerging Christian faith of the time. The triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, attempting to put a name to the mystery surrounding the faith, marked each time. Volf and Bass suggest that the work of Clement of Alexandria was a good example of a spiritual practice that did not embrace the worldly views of men.⁷ From the Orthodox faith Irenaeus (130-200 C. E.) came the thought of the Holy Spirit inspired knowledge of discernment that helped those who heard the words to distinguish between truth and error. Through the wisdom of God people are able to understand the revelations that come from the word of God. Origin of Alexandria (185-254 C. E.) saw the Bible as a book of mystery with a higher expression of spiritual meaning hidden in the words.⁸ Body, Spirit, and mind were intimately related where spiritual progress occurred with discipline. With this, monasticism evolved into the solitary life of the desert mothers and father and marked many aspects of Christianity into the fourth century.

In the fourth century spiritual power and the grace of God were offered through the life of the saints with increased focus on prayer, intercession, and devotion to Mary. Benedict of Nursia founded twelve monasteries with twelve monks living in each monastery. Throughout this period Christ was seen as the center of devotion. Unity and wholeness were a theme of this new

³Christopher Partridge, ed., *Introduction to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 311.

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament, A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 402.

⁵ J. Patout Burns, and, Gerald M. Fagin, *The Holy Spirit, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 14.

⁶ Gordon Mursell, ed., *The Story of Christian Spirituality, Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 33.

⁷ Volf, Miroslav and Dorothy, C. Bass, *Practicing Theology, Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 84.

⁸ Mursell, Gordon, ed., *The Story of Christian Spirituality, Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 56-57.

emerging faith. Augustine (late 300's-early 400 C.E.) a Christian Neoplatonist suggested that, "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe."⁹ This is a more mystical view of the experience of God, which suggests that faith is a part of that spiritual experience.

Numerous subsections of the faith developed to form spiritual-religious communities as diversely ranged as the Gnostics to the Jewish Christian. Each formed a slightly divergent belief system of Christianity, spirituality and the doctrine that expressed their particular structure of the faith. Christianity continued to spread outward from the point of origination. And with the fall of the Roman Empire, around 476 A.D., came some turmoil for the Western Christian church.

In 597 A.D. missionaries arrived in England from Rome. They were led by Augustine and sent by Pope Gregory the Great to establish headquarters in Canterbury. Gregory wrote of practical spirituality using statements such as, "miracles are the greater the more spiritual they are, and *inward grace*."¹⁰ The church continued to grow strong through the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. There continued to be emphasis on the monastic life, contemplation, prayer, and the triune God. Recognition was given to the Holy Spirit living within us.

The Great Schism

Social and political situations of the time continued to impact the physical experiences of the church and the spiritual fortitude of the faith. In the time around 1000-1500 A.D. (often named the Middle Ages) the church became more prominent in political authority, but many Christians continued to hold in esteem the contemplative-spiritual doctrines of the faith.

Thomas Aquinas (1200 A.D.) wrote of his experiences in the revelation of God, which made all he had written before to be "like straw"¹¹ in comparison to what he had seen. St. Frances (1100 A.D.) attempted to live a life following the tenant of Christ. He was considered a mystic, living life in poverty, caring for the sick, showing a love for nature, and acknowledging the wholeness of creation in the Divine mystery. Cartesian monks and women mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, and Briget of Sweden were noted to also maintain and promote a spiritual faith of prayer and service.

John Tauler, a German mystic (1300 A.D.) offered his words of faith:

A man ought to busy himself in good and useful occupations of whatever kind they may be, casting his care upon God, and labor silently and watchfully, keeping a rein upon himself, and proving himself, so as to sift what it is that urges and impels him in his work. Further, he must look within, and mark whether the Holy Spirit will have him to be active or quiet; that he may obey His godly leadings in each instance, and do and leave undone by the influences of the Holy Spirit; now resting, now working, but ever fulfilling his due task in peace.¹²

⁹ St. Augustine, *On the Gospel of John*, XL, 9.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 80.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 106.

¹² Johannes Tauler and Susanna Winkworth, *Selections from the Life and Sermons of the Reverend John Tauler* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878), 136.

In the East spirituality took on the design of *inward looking* and *mystical relationship* of the Greek Orthodox Churches. Cyril of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers supported the Christology of faith and the Trinity. Classical Byzantine spiritual theology was promoted by writers, such as Isaac of Niniveh (700 A.D.), John of Damascus (eleventh century) who wrote on the Orthodox faith and helped to bring together the doctrines of Eastern Church and the Hesychast tradition. They maintained the emphasis on inner quiet, prayer to Jesus, and the utilization of spiritual guides. Spirituality in faith continued to be a prominent part of the equations. As literacy continued to grow, so was the ability for the general population to learn more about living a spiritual life

The Reformation Begins

In 1453 A.D., Islam overtook Constantinople and by the early sixteenth century. Muslims were a significance presence in the Balkans.¹³ It was a time of chaos. Martin Luther, with the Augustinian Order, feared that only time stood in the way of Islam's influence over Europe. Luther was also concerned with the church authority that suggested that human beings couldn't save themselves by their own efforts, but by their membership in the church. Luther suggested that people could be saved by God's free grace. He called for reform within the Catholic Church; however he was charged with heresy. Luther started a reform movement that initiated a spiritual renewal of the German people, offered in terms of a doctrine of justification. Luther's theology brought back the faith of early Christianity from the ancient Greco-Roman times. Through the death of Christ a new relationship was formed through a connection with the Holy Spirit, and sin is taken away. Lives can be transformed by this saving grace.

John Calvin (1500) was also attempting a reformation of the Catholic Church. Protestantism was emerging. A great deal of emphasis in this new faith order placed on the importance of the saving grace of God and the mystery of our connection with the Holy Spirit. Puritans also resisted the government of the church. Most Puritans did not leave the church; however their spiritual healing was supplemented in a small group situation outside of the church.

Politically Henry VIII, as king, declared himself the supreme head of the church and set up his own form of the church. This would become emergence of the Anglican Church. A counter reform was simultaneously occurring within the Roman Catholic Church. Ignatius Loyola and Teresa of Avila were introducing new expressions of spirituality into the faith. Discernment came from reflection and prayer, contemplation, and spiritual mentors. John of the Cross, who in 1578 A.D. was thought by many to be miraculous in his escape from Toledo, spent his last years in a constant struggle against his opponents and in the writing his mystical theology titled *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. In *The Spiritual Canticle* he wrote, "And thus the soul loves God in the Holy Spirit together with the Holy Spirit, not by means of him as an instrument, but together with him, by reason of the transformation,"¹⁴

There was another movement occurring in the 1700's. Methodism was being introduced as an attempt to revive the Church of England. John Wesley in 1738 A.D. was offered an encounter with the Divine at the society of the Aldersgate Street as he expressed in his writings:

¹³ Christopher Partridge, ed., *Introduction to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). 314.

¹⁴ John of the Cross, "The Complete Works of John of the Cross", *The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza XXXVII*, E. A. Peers (London, England, 1965), Vol. 2, 165.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.¹⁵

Conversion of the heart was illustrated by life-style conversions exemplifying a life of Christian spirituality. It seems the movement of seeking the spiritual connection often arises during time of increased struggle or chaos. Even people during the time of struggle to create the United States spoke of the Spirit of God as they formed a new country.

Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind.¹⁶

Society then as now seemed to be searching for ways in which to bring this balance into play and offer challenges that are unique to the life in this present time.

Therese of Lisieux, (late 1800's), a French Carmelite nun, was known as the Little Flower of Jesus. She exemplified the *little way*, achieving goodness by performing the humblest task and carrying out the most trivial action. In her writings she discussed the aspects of the doctrine of Trinity from the place of intellectual reasoning at a deeper level that came from union with God, "in the extreme interior, in some place very deep within."¹⁷ Brother Lawrence, and Vincent DePaul were also contributors to the spirituality of the Roman Catholic Church during this time with their expression of a spiritual life of Christ lived out in daily life experiences.

With each historical shift of community came the challenge to the people of that time to discover what it meant to discern the inspired "word" of the Divine.

¹⁵ John Wesley, "Personal Journal", May 24, 1738.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, "Revisal of the Laws: Draft of Legislation, a Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom", 1776, Section 1.

¹⁷ Kavanaugh, K. and Rodriquez, O., trans. *The Interior Castle, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C.: I.C.S. Publications, 1980), vol. 2, 430.

Spiritual and Religious Outline

Spirit

- Breath or wind. Ruach and spiritus
- It is unseen but vital to our life. Without breath we cannot live. It is our connection to life, and earth, and universe.
- Being spiritual is about being connected, living our life in harmony with all things. Just as your breath is in harmony with all the things in your body and in harmony with the things around you.
- Foundational element of faith

Religion

- Middle English *religioun*, from Old French *religion*, from Latin *religi*, *religin-*, perhaps from *religre*, to tie fast.
- A personal or institutionalized system grounded in such belief and worship.
- The life or condition of a person in a religious order.
- Religion is a human attempt to make order from the unknown connection we have to the spirit.
- Integrative, community, tangible.

Modern and Postmodern Perspectives

From the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1950's a majority of Americans practiced their faith within the framework of a religious denomination.¹⁸

Organized religion was the main spiritual experience in how one expressed religious and spiritual faith. But toward the end of the twentieth century, Americans seem to be moving towards a more eclectic view of spirituality and its relationship to self, to church and to community. Many mainline congregations are experiencing a loss in membership, and a majority of a younger generation started to leave organized religions.¹⁹

This change also seems to be seen with the overall movement from the Information Age to a Bionomic Age.²⁰ It has been a time of transition for our entire society and for the world as it becomes more globally connected, and as consumer ideologies change with the movement of technology. Words suggested to describe this social expression of life as a postmodern experience are *personal choice*, *many truths*, *social constructs*, *experiential*, and *non-coercive*.

The characteristics are obviously a shift from some of the more modernistic descriptors of the early 1900's, where words such as *ultimate truth*, *absolutism*, *scientific proof*, or from the perception that reality accurately corresponds to the way the world is as suggested by Jim Leffel in his discussions on postmodernism.²¹

¹⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁹ Howard Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 12.

²⁰ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami, Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 17-18.

²¹ Jim Leffel, *Postmodernism: the "Spirit of the Age"* (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 2005), <http://www.xenos.org/essays/relrev2.htm>.

This “postmodern experience might offer thought to the emerging trend toward alternative religious experiences, and also finding spirituality and wellness centers making a presence in communities?”²² It seems that finding the words to express the mystery of this Divine presence is in many ways an improbable task. The minute that human words are added to the equation the *Word* of God is somehow reduced. But still there is a need within us to find a way to turn the unknown into something we can comprehend and use as a guide for how to live our lives. There is a desire to help better express the relationship of worship, faith, and spirituality in our changing society, using the words of the world to attempt once again to explain the mystery of God.

I should suggest at this point that Postmodern is a term that carries with it many meanings and varying definitions to the phenomenon it describes. There is no way to give a comprehensive definition for this overall shift in community thinking, however the defining picture of postmodernism can be considered by integrating some current thoughts about spirituality and the postmodern age.

John Cobb discusses the postmodern experience in relation to Christianity.²³ He suggests that, “Christianity no longer occupies the primary place in the commitment system of most citizens. Even most of those who attend church have their basic attitudes and convictions shaped by sources other than the Christian community and its traditions.”²⁴ Cobb offers a discussion that reflects this postmodern look at Christianity as he states, “But whether Christianity is an obstacle to moving forward into a postmodern world, or a resource for doing so, depends on how its adherents understand the significance of their faith.”²⁵

Cobb, as he relates to Christian theology, could see the influence of postmodernism:

*To be a Christian is not to compare Christianity with others and make claims either to superiority or to equality. It is not to try to impose Christian teachings on society as a whole. It is to immerse oneself in one’s own community, appropriating its values and meanings more deeply, and living from its stories and rituals... It begins with the rejection of the notion that language mirrors an objective and independent reality. According to this view, there is no access apart from language to a “real” world, and hence there can be no correspondence of language to that world.*²⁶

This statement might indicate that, to view spiritual faith traditions, a review of past words identifying the belief structure could be of benefit. From this review, a deeper understanding of many of the aspect of our spirituality can be seen in a different perspective. We find relation to the words and activities of today’s Christian traditions. The words of the past must not be thrown away, but rather remember that these are linguistic ties that bind the spiritual faith with this

²² James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality, the Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 13-35.

²³ John Cobb, *Postmodernism and Public Policy: Reframing Religion, Culture, Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 14-19.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 14.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 15.

physical world we inhabit with God's overall story.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal minister, defined a working postmodernism definition to describe this new age as a place where "the modern age is over- the age in which we believed in the power of the state, or the academy, or the church to bring out the best in us."²⁷ In this age people will only see the value in something that is "...absolutely truthful about the realities in their lives, and if it supports them to name those realities for themselves."²⁸

Sallie McFague discusses the postmodern age from the perspective of "...the denial of all fixed certainties and universal assertions, the delight in pluralism and difference."²⁹ and "...that subjects do not make statements; rather, interpretations emerge from various contexts with subjects as the channels of these interpretations".³⁰

As we move into this new era, possibly marked with increases in struggles and chaos, the dialogue for this topic may become more important to the continuation of our faith traditions as they relate to new and changing life experiences. Spirituality and Religion can also be topics of continued discussion that plays a role in the changing landscape of, not only our religious traditions, but quite possibly our American way of life.

Newsweek polled 1,004 Americans in 2005 to learn more about how they worship and what they believe. From this group 55% described themselves as *religious* and *spiritual* and 24% as *spiritual* but not *religious*. When asked how important spirituality was in their daily life 57% said it was *very important*, with the secondary group of 24% stating that spirituality in their daily life was *somewhat important*. When asked when they feel the strongest connection with God, 40% of the people polled reported: *when praying alone*, 21% *when in nature*, 21% *in a house of worship*, and 6% *when praying with others*.³¹ Even within the framework of people who professed to be *spiritual* or *religious* there is a large diversity of religious affiliations.³² This would support, to some degree, the thought that no longer are the traditional denominations of our parents the central aspect of a faith experience. There is a shift in perceiving the connection with God.

As Marjorie Thompson states in her book *Soul Feast*:

There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed creature, it reveals something is missing from the depths of our rational, secular, and affluent culture. Both within and beyond traditional faith

²⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin, the Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications. 2000), 27-28.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 29.

²⁹ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 26. From the analysis of postmodernism and its relationship to theology by Paul Lakeland in *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Newsweek and Beliefnet. "Where We Stand on Faith." *Newsweek Magazine*, 5 September, 2005, 50-51. Research associates interviewed 1,004 adults nationally, 18 and older, August 2-4, 2005 with a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent points.

³² Newsweek. "Belief By the Numbers." *Newsweek Magazine*, 5 September 2005, 54. Based from the poll of 50,000 U. S. adults, City University of New York. 2001.

communities, a hunger for spiritual depth and integrity is gaining momentum.³³

It is a time when people are beginning to differentiate between the spiritual and religious aspects of faith. They are searching for a way to integrate these two components. This differentiation seems to be in concert with an overall shift in societal values and belief structures identified as the postmodern era. When searching for the words that define the mystery, current societal and political values offer one perspective that may either play in concert with, or be diametrically opposed to, the belief structure of those searching for the mystical, illusive aspects of spiritual faith.

French philosopher Max Picard wrote in his poetic eulogy that silence was the central place of faith.³⁴ It is a place where we can give the word back to the God who first gave it to us. It is faith that helps us to find our actions in the world. It helps us keep searching for what we are seeking.

And Wilfred Smith suggests:

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event. Men and women of this kind of faith face catastrophe and confusion, affluence and sorrow, unperturbed; face opportunity with conviction and drive; and face others with cheerful charity.³⁵

And James Denney noted:

The faith, which abandons itself to Christ, is at the same time a receiving of the Spirit of Christ... There are not two things here but one, though it can be represented in the two relations that the word faith and Spirit suggest. Where human responsibility is to be emphasized, it is naturally faith, which is put in the front (Galatians 3:2); where the gracious help of God is the main point, prominence is given to the Spirit.³⁶

In many respects, these defining views of faith suggest that this is a *place* where we are transformed outside of our own need to validate ourselves. We can submit to the experience of mystery. We trust in the silent breath in our hearts and give up our own needs to meet the needs of something that is wider and greater than we could ever hope to find in a physical place.

³³ Majorie J. Thompson, *SoulFeast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

³⁴ Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 34.

³⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

³⁶ James Denney, "The Theology of the Epistle to the Romans", *The Expositor*, 4:426.

Although the place is an important identifying aspect of the faith and religious traditions, to stand by itself is merely a translation of faith and does not always lend itself to the transformational aspects of spiritual faith. The transformation aspects require a commitment to experiencing that mystical, living, breathing part of everyday relationships. Transforming faith requires a new depth of understanding and practice to daily life.

When we look at the transformation of our faith traditions spirituality seems, in some ways, to become the experience of trying to incorporate our faith into our daily life, both in our church and the community. Joan Chittister stated that, "Spirituality is more than churchgoing. It is possible to go to church and never develop a spirituality at all. Spirituality is the way in which we express a living faith in a real world. Spirituality is the sum total of the attitude and actions that define our life of faith."³⁷

Spirituality may be the part of our faith that occurs "...far before we do anything explicitly religious at all," Roland Rolheiser explained "we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality."³⁸ Or maybe it is the faith that St. Augustine suggested in his words, "If you understand it is not God."³⁹

In the stricter sense of defining spirituality we can also look to some tangible defining characteristics: "Having the nature of spirit, not tangible or material, concerned with or affecting the soul, of, from or relating to God."⁴⁰

Or the expression of spirituality from Friar M. Louis:

The spiritual life is oriented toward God, rather than toward the immediate satisfaction of the material needs of life, but it is not, for all that, a life of unreality or a life of dreams. On the contrary, without a life of the spirit, our whole existence becomes unsubstantial and illusory. The life of the spirit, by integrating us in the real order established by God, puts us in the fullest possible contact with reality-not as we imagine it, but as it really is. It does so by making us aware of our own real selves, and placing them in the presence of God. Bringing this into a daily life experiences is, at best, a difficult task.⁴¹

Wuthnow suggests, "The ancient wisdom that emphasizes the idea of spiritual practices needs to be rediscovered..."⁴² It is a part of both the community of faith believers and for each individual. He further offers this view of spiritual practice:

³⁷ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 4-5.

³⁸ Roland Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing, The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 7.

³⁹ Allan D. Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages, An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 389.

⁴⁰ American Heritage Dictionary, <http://www.bartleby.com/61/>, January 28, 2007, 3:30 P. M.

⁴¹ M. Louis, *Abbey of Gethsemani*, 1955, no other publication information available.

⁴² Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 16.

Spiritual practices put responsibility squarely on individuals to spend time on a regular basis worshiping, communing with, listening to, and attempting to understand the ultimate source of sacredness in their lives. Spiritual practices can be performed in the company of others, and they are inevitably embedded in religious institutions, but they must also be performed individually if they are to be personally meaningful and enriching. Spiritual practices require individuals to engage reflectively in a conversation with their past, examine who they have been, how they have been shaped, and where they are headed. Spiritual practices have a moral dimension, for they instruct people in how they should behave toward themselves and with each other, but these practices are also an item of faith, encouraging people to walk each day with partial knowledge and in cautious hope.⁴³

As a society and as individuals, there seems to be a searching to find God in church and in daily life experiences. People hope to find security in the knowledge that life is supported by something that is larger than the human experience. Richard Rohr, in his book *Everything Belongs*, stated:

Without the awareness of the river, without a sense that we are supported, we succumb to fear. We are afraid ourselves so we frighten others. But can we live in such a way that people don't need to be afraid of us? I wish we could do that. I wish we caused no fear in others. I wish others could feel the receiving spirit, the universal forgiving in us...we all want to be around people who don't do that. We all want to be with people around whom we feel safe and forgiven just by being next to them. You know you can show your darkest part to these people, and they'll still receive you.⁴⁴

This is a part of a faith that seems to be constant throughout the centuries for people who listen for the wisdom within them. Religion and worship are an important aspect of faith and possibly a necessary part of our overall faith experiences. But for those seeking a deeper connection, could it be that faith can embrace both the work of the church and the practice of the Divine in life experiences? Is spirituality the link between our daily connection with the Divine and the societal traditions of a religion?

Translating and Transforming Religion

Ken Wilber states in his book *One Taste* translational religion is:

...acts as a way of creating *meaning* for the separate self: it offers myths and stories and tales and narratives and rituals and revivals that, taken together, help the separate self make sense of, and endure, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This function of religion does not usually or necessarily change the level of consciousness in a person; it

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 145.

does not deliver radical transformation. Nor does it deliver a shattering liberation from the separate self altogether. Rather, it consoles the self, fortifies the self, defends the self, promotes the self. As long as the separate self believes the myths, performs the rituals, mouths the prayers, or embraces the dogma, then the self, it is fervently believed, will be "saved"--either now in the glory of being God-saved or Goddess-favored, or in an after-life that insures eternal wonderment.⁴⁵

Wilber suggests that with translation:

...the self is simply given a new way to think or feel about reality. The self is given a new belief--perhaps holistic instead of atomistic, perhaps forgiveness instead of blame, perhaps relational instead of analytic. The self then learns to translate its world and its being in the terms of this new belief or new language or new paradigm, and this new and enchanting translation acts, at least temporarily, to alleviate or diminish the terror inherent in the heart of the separate self.⁴⁶

Whereas the function of transformational religion is that it:

...does not fortify the separate self, but utterly shatters it--not consolation but devastation, not entrenchment but emptiness, not complacency but explosion, not comfort but revolution--in short, not a conventional bolstering of consciousness but a radical transmutation and transformation at the deepest seat of consciousness itself.⁴⁷

Wilber offers that:

...with transformation, the very process of translation itself is challenged, witnessed, undermined, and eventually dismantled. With typical *translation*, the self (or subject) is given a new way to think about the world (or objects); but with radical *transformation*, the self itself is inquired into, looked into, grabbed by its throat and literally throttled to death.⁴⁸

Wilber also suggests, "There are several different ways that we can state these two important functions of religion. The first function, that of creating meaning for the self, is a type of horizontal movement; the second function, that of transcending the self, is a type of *vertical* movement (higher or deeper, depending on your metaphor)."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 27-28.

⁴⁷ Ken Wilber, *One Taste* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2000), 27.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 27.

In the context of this ideal, it might suggest that in the more postmodern aspect of the dichotomy, the trend in American society is leading to a transformational movement of our religious relationships. Americans are searching to find peace in a troubled world. People are identifying spirituality in ways that do not always have to validate their own belief structures, yet still allow other beliefs to exist in parallel harmony.

In this way people identify the commonalities of the faith as they relate to the more spiritual and mystical aspects of faith. It also recognizes the semantic and traditional differences of each religion as it relates to how to translate the mystery of the Divine into a place or space where people can feel safe within a personal faith walk. As America emerges into what many call a postmodern era, the picture of faith and religion shifts to accommodate the changing times.

M. Craig Barnes also offered his perspective of how spirituality and worship can relate to the human experience in relation once again to a physical place of worship versus the place of yearning. Barnes stated that, "The point of worship is not to find home, but to become clearer about what home we are yearning to find."⁵⁰ Barnes identified works from the late historian Mircea Eliade who claimed that all ancient religions cherish some type of *axis mundi* or axle around which the world revolves. "To this day many tribal groups still build their homes around a single, sacred pole that extends spiritually through the center of the earth and into heaven. The function of this pole is to keep heaven above and the earth beneath, for they are held together only by the *axis mundi*."⁵¹

People will run for protection to their *axis mundi*, which keeps the heavens from falling on them. Barnes further suggests, "All religious people have cherished some sacred symbol that nurtures their hope that they are not abandoned to the anomie and chaos of life."⁵² For some Christians then, the gathering at the cross on Sunday for worship may come to be the *axis mundi*, a safe place for people to come.

Others may be seeking this safe place and still others may find this safe place within, a sacred space that is the centeredness of their soul. With each view of *axis mundi* emerges a different comprehension of what place the spirit of God is identified in human life experiences.

The question that would possibly arise in an emerging postmodern perspective is how do we balance the transformational aspects described by Wilber related to our sacred space of God within us to the translational religion within the physical structures that keep us focused on the value of our faith as it validates our own personal faith walk?

The Journey Between Physical and Spiritual

Thomas Kelly, a Quaker missionary, in his book *A Testament of Devotion* suggested:

There is an experience of the eternal breaking into time, which transforms all life into a miracle of faith and action. Unspeakable, profound, and full of glory as an inward experience, it is the root of concern for all creation, the true ground of social endeavor. This inward Life and the outward Concern are truly one whole, and, were it possible, ought to be described simultaneously. But linear sequence and succession

⁵⁰ Craig M. Barnes, "Homestretch," *Christian Century*, 20 September 2003, 8.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

of words is our inevitable lot and compels us to treat separately what is not separate: first, the Eternal Now and the Temporal Now, and second, the Nature and Ground of Social Concern.⁵³

The life journey is a process of trying to balance the physical and the spiritual world. Perfection is, perhaps more about being at peace with self and the world than with doing everything the “correct” way. Each person has a different way to connect with the Divine. Each person sees the Divine in a little bit different light. The task then becomes more about integrating a personal relationship with spirit into the workings of daily life experiences.

Having faith in this Divine connection and on the *perfection (being completely at peace with whatever happens in each given moment)* of that relationship is the foundational element of faith. The breath of spirit becomes the breath within each person when they acknowledge that Divine presence throughout the day. Religion builds from this foundational element. Religion ties fast our beliefs and our practices that express the silent spirit in the world.

Spirituality is a process, a practice, a connection to the Divine. It is a way to see your true self and see the truth in the world around you. When you take time each day to be with the Divine, to listen to the words of your heart, love and peace will come to you. Then you can take that love and pass it on to others.

Reed, A Breath, A Way

The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is “loss of soul.” When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it.

Thomas Moore, Care of the Soul

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⁵³ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 65.