Experience: Its Significance in Contemporary Christian Spirituality

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Abstract

Contemporary Christian spirituality, in its lived-life and academic expressions, is inherently experiential. Spirituality thus understood involves various understandings of experience and can be elucidated in the light of some of these meanings. Christian spirituality now has less to do with interventionist, supernatural experiences than with experience understood as contemplative or mystical ways of seeing. Such experience is more linear and every-day than punctiliar or conversionist in nature. Experience in Christian spirituality is pronouncedly immanent, rooted in a new perception of life in general. It also preserves God's transcendence in an appreciation of God's mystery and essential otherness. Academic spirituality finds contemporary resources in the growing experiential interest in spirituality, and also from its own reclaimed legacy. Spirituality shows signs of finding a self-sustained place in the academy through developing its own unique theory of experience.

Keywords: Academic, Christian, Experience, Immanence, Lived-life, Spirituality, Transcendence.

1 Introduction

Contemporary Christian spirituality, understood as that developing phenomenon, at least since Vatican II (1962-1965), raises inherently the significance of experience. Experience, variously understood, is engaged by

contemporary spirituality in enlightening ways. In some cases a certain understanding of experience is affirmed, in others the particular understanding of experience must be qualified, or even dispensed with, if nascent Christian spirituality is to be appreciated and understood. By allowing 'experience' a range of understandings, then, one is able to understand the nature of Christian spirituality, and in what sense experience is being affirmed or denied. It is also assumed in this essay that the emerging spirituality described herein expresses itself in two modes. One mode is that of the everyday lived-life experience of Christian spirituality. The other mode is that of the academic discipline of spirituality. Both these expressions of spirituality speak to experience and clarify themselves by virtue of their relation thereto. In the main, the first part of the essay is given to spirituality in its lived-life form, while the final section, pertains to the academic expression.

2 'Experience' as Problematic

Speaking of experience is problematic on a number of counts. First, experience (in the popular sense of a specific religious or Christian experience) often assumes a contested or uneasy place in Christian theology or spirituality. Second, experience proves a slippery word of variable meaning, never yielding without problem to the constraints of definition. In academic philosophy, for instance, experience hardly occupies a self-explanatory status and definition[1]. Third, the word presents with a virtual ambiguity. Does it refer to a definite, punctiliar (even intrusive) phenomenon or to life-experience as a whole in its more mundane, almost every-day sense? Last, in the academic domain, experience is often characterised as the inferior hypothetical counterpart to a more deductive, theoretically based procedure. In some ways Christian spirituality seems obligated to address this characterisation. What understanding can experience deliver against this backdrop, or what is the validity of such a representation?

In the light of such diversity and presumption, experience definitely qualifies as a polysemy—a single word with many meanings. Given such diversity, which understanding of experience is being referred to here? In

[1] Indeed, it seems that '[t]he word 'experience' is often used by philosophers, but seldom defined' (Russell [1946] 1961:768).

answer to that question, and at the risk of over-accommodation, it is helpful and instructive to consider quite a few of these meanings. Different perspectives on 'experience' throw valuable light on contemporary Christian spirituality, at once on spirituality's academic and lived-life expressions. Each meaning has at some time been too easily assumed as *the* particular 'experience' under consideration when used in relation to God or the Christian life, and probably with good reason. What follows, then, is a treatment of contemporary Christian spirituality in its lived-life and academic forms so far as it relates to these *variegated* understandings of experience. Phrased differently: What significance or place does 'experience' have in contemporary Christian spirituality? First dealt with is what is commonly referred to as 'a Christian experience.'

3 'A Christian Experience'

By Christian experience here is meant an experience *of* God, *of* Christ, *of* the Spirit, or of the redemption brought about by God. This experience might be in contrast, for instance, to the secondary experience of Christian fellowship as such, or of the church, or of conversion, or generalised experience of my neighbour *as* experience of God (Marsh 2004:120).

3.1 An Apologia

Some justification for writing of this kind of 'experience' at all in the sense of a characteristic Christian or religious experience in contemporary Christian spirituality appears necessary. To be sure there are no words for 'religious experience' in the New Testament. For example, '[i]t is impossible to translate "religious experience" into New Testament Greek' (Richardson 1969:127). Unsurprisingly then, experience has not found an obvious, self-apparent home in Christian doctrine. From a Protestant perspective one might add that 'experience' is not one of the tenets of the Reformation. In Luther's (1483-1546) understanding, faith is more likely 'a stubborn protest *against* experience, a protest that is based on the promises of God' (Nürnberger 2007:126; e.a.). More strongly put, experience seems to have been a late-developer in Christian history. Personal experience in Christian life arguably found a promotive atmosphere in the much later era of Romanticism's spiritual aspirations and emotional depths. However, as late

as the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival in England, the condemnatory word 'enthusiasm,' or 'enthusiast', articulated a general disapproval of religious experience. This censuring word, and its tone, was also part of the (often deistic) Church's disapproving vocabulary.

It may be suggested that there are preferable synonyms for 'experience.' Are not 'consciousness', 'awareness', 'mystical' or 'religious sensibility' less freighted and ambiguous words? Why speak of experience at all? To that it needs to be said, first, that the aforesaid recommended words do not sufficiently include the specific punctiliar kind of experience considered here at the moment—that is to say, *a* Christian experience. Neither do they convey seriously enough the patent claims to certain kinds of experience made by Pentecostalism at the turn of the 19th century. Its subsequent ecumenical diversification in the form of the Charismatic Movement in the 20th century and Pentecostalism's enormous experiential impact on the contemporary world, perhaps particularly in Africa, makes such 'experience' deserving of attention. From the Methodist tradition, it is well known that John Wesley (1703-1791) found the assurance of salvation he was looking for through his *experience* at Aldersgate Street—24th May, 1738. His diary relates that 'about a quarter before nine…I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ…and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins …' (Curnock 1938:51). While that experience might (arguably) have sustained Wesley throughout his life, it was also of a pointed, interventionist kind, at a specific moment in time[2]. Such experiences of the Spirit, in addition, seem more than sporadically referred to in the Bible, whether with regard to Jesus, the Apostle Paul and Peter, or the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Mark 1:9-11; Romans 8:16; Acts 2:1-13; Acts 11:5-17). What's more, 'spirit' or 'spirituality' does elicit an experiential sense by force of the words' own etymology and

[2] John Wesley does not refer specifically to this experience later in his life, in stark contrast to Wesleyan (or Methodist) fascination with it. Of course it was a landmark experience for him and tallies with much that follows in his thought and life. Still, have Methodists afforded this event a higher profile than warranted, especially where other crucial Wesleyan emphases are conveniently ignored or under-played? (co-author Trevor Ruthenberg is a Methodist minister).

signification. The Biblical words for 'spirit', whether *ruach* from the older Testament, or πνευμα from the New Testament refer to 'breath' and 'wind' in their literal meanings. Both wind and breath are experiential in their inducement, if not always consciously so. Certainly one's 'breath' is decidedly personal, animated and inimitably one's own, even visceral in connotation—and thus suggestively experiential. Few things are as experiential and self-expressed as one's own breath, especially as an infusive conveyance in the vocalisation of one's inner mind and person.

3.2 A Different Kind of Experience

While one would not necessarily want to question the validity of the kind of 'Christian experience' latterly referred to, one still needs to ask, for the present purpose: What is characteristically distinctive about spirituality's *contemporary* expression, even if this distinctiveness is still largely outside the mainstream of church life? What new thing does emerging or renascent spirituality teach, or have the capacity to teach, as opposed to present day notions? If these questions are under purview, which they *are* here, then one notices a different rendering or presentation of experience (or even discontinuance thereof) to that which has been heretofore described—indeed, *a different kind of 'experience.'* That is, the contemporary interest in mysticism, contemplation and apophaticism for example, particularly in academic spirituality but also in its lived-life phenomenon, reflects a turn away from sensate experience and from stereotypical experiences. These words (mysticism, apophaticism and contemplation) all bear a common-denominator of 'letting be,' or 'releasement.' The relinquishment is not only of imagery and analogical meditative activity, but also *ipso facto* of the dependence on, and expectation of, experience or experiences. Such openness and the surrender of human interference and prescription are seen more as relating to experience of God, thus essentially negating 'a Christian experience' commonly understood. This sense of negation is illustrated in Andrews' (2005:143) words that '[t]heological discourse does not define the experience of God. It merely points to the ambiguity that underlies every human experience and, at the same time, attempts to expose its limits.' Indeed, mysticism in its apophatic expression infers a releasement that pre-empts a will-to-power (Fiand 1987:88). Such releasement in principle does

not exclude the relinquishment of an experience, or desire therefor. In this regard the possibility of a much sought after *experience* of God being an instance of will-to-power, or perhaps even of incipient elitism, albeit of a religious nature, should not be dismissed out of hand.

Matthews (2000:87) makes the salutary point that (for instance) 'mysticism is not an experience which can be 'described'. Further, '[i]t is by no means certain that the mystical experiences of which people speak are really 'experiences' at all,' assuming, that is, that they are of the original classical kind (Matthews 2000:87). Indeed Turner's (1995:1) admirable work on mysticism, of which Matthews is most appreciative, virtually begins with the words:

> … I began by wondering whether or not there was any such thing as 'mystical experience'… because on the one hand there seemed to be a common, informal view around that the 'mystical' had something to do with the having of very uncommon, privileged 'experiences'; and, on the other, because when I read any of the Christian writers who were said to be mystics I found that many of them … made no mention at all of any such experiences ….

An experientially charged contemporary 'mysticism' is, in Matthews' and Turner's view, less an accurate rendering of original mysticism than it is a reading *in* of present perspectives and aspirations. In other words, the 'experience' of classical mysticism turns out to be quite *devoid* of the word's preferred secular understanding, that is, its evocation of sensation, novelty and adrenalin rushes, religious or otherwise[3]. Another writer says, again with respect to mysticism, that while it is experienced as more of a

[3] This might be one good reason for retaining the word 'experience' here. Using experience (admittedly rather open-endedly) enables us to engage our twenty-first century perceptions, inviting pertinent discourse. It can show what *kind* of experience, if it be experience at all, that contemporary resources in spirituality have to offer. For example, it could raise questions about the oft-heard, usually unreflective phrase, 'Christian *experience*', and whether these two words are self-evident, inseparable partners or just an unconscious way of speaking.

feeling than a state of intellect it is also a state of knowledge, 'but the experience is *not* similar to normal everyday seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching' (Hvolbek 1998:35-36; e.a.).

Suffice it to say, then, that *if* the particular or unique contribution of resurgent and cutting-edge spirituality is to bring to the Christian life a notable experience then that experience calls for careful qualification. It would further need to be noticed that the experience is less sharply punctiliar, or a kind of pointed 'visitation,' than is commonly spoken of in pietist or evangelical tradition. More important is the recognition that this kind of spirituality largely *undermines* the widespread cultural fixation with experience. It thus has something different to offer than might all too easily be anticipated by Christians in general or religious consumerism in particular. In short, a Christian spirituality that is now resourced by its own mystical and contemplative dimensions is in some real respects incongruous with the premise of 'a Christian experience' described earlier in this section. More pointedly, this newly resourced spirituality does not refer to the kind of experience that is popularly fed by an evangelical tradition and ethos—a tradition that in some real way lends to such experiences' substance and perpetuity.

3.3 Independent Discovery and Validation

At least one feature of 'a Christian experience' that bears likeness to renascent and retrieved spirituality is the sense of independent discovery, validation and personal interiorisation—or further elaborated, the inward realisation of *contact*; of mutual recognition and personal-divine reciprocity. Wesley's (Curnock 1938:51) experience at Aldersgate Street, for example, yielded an 'assurance' and personal appropriation, together with new-found faith[4]. Such personal validation and 'owning', with a degree of qualification, might also be found in what is new about latter-day Christian spirituality,

[4] Wesley's word, assurance, would be less apt for contemporary spirituality, being era-bound and expressing a different theological climate. (Indeed Wesley vacillated on the profile that should be given to 'assurance' after initially according it firm doctrinal status.) But the commonality lies in the sense of 'owning' one's faith as opposed to living off exterior dogma in a condition of relative non-participation and religiosity.

inchoately as early as the years after the landmark Vatican II (1962-1965). In fact, even before Vatican II the anticipatory and intuitive writing of Merton (1960) reflected the turn to reclamation of personal validation and the individual reclamation of Christian experience. The earliest desert monastic, according to Merton (1960:6), evidenced:

> … a refusal to be content with arguments, concepts, and technical verbiage. They sought a way to God that was unchartered and freely chosen, *not inherited from others* who had mapped it out beforehand. They sought God whom they alone could find, not one who was given in a set stereotyped form by somebody else [italics mine].

Merton's words characterise at least one understanding or indispensable part of an experience, namely something that relates to risk, trial and venture—that takes us outside of ourselves and our safe places. Where one speaks, in other words, of what is new and emergent in spiritual experience then it is, amongst other things, a reflection of the dissatisfaction with packaged dogma and a prescriptive spiritual theology. Put more positively, it has to do with a personal procuring and retrieval of one's spiritual life. A spirituality invested with this distinctive impulse for personal validation will not take back seat to hierarchical and elitist 'hand-me-downs,' whether those evaluative adjectives are harsh or not. Spiritual authority is no longer invested in priests, bishops, clergy, and people who were previously given such authority. Tacey (2004:37) says that this is so for two reasons: '[T]he inner authority of conscience and spirit is compelling, and people no longer trust old authority figures.' With regard to the second reason given by Tacey it will be clear that spirituality is ever a child of its times, thus the decidedly postmodern flavour of decentralisation, diversification and, in a phrase, 'suspicion of authority'. To be sure, the reclaiming of inner authority is reflective of the postmodern spirit.

In summation, while one cannot simply equate an experience in contemporary spirituality with similar breakthrough-experiences in previous Christian generations the commonality lies in making one's faith or spirituality *one's own*. Whatever an experience is taken to mean it has something to do with personal validation and discovery as opposed to largely

routine observance, or nominal adherence to religious legacy. Within the ambit of this commonality of old and new, however, is the arguably singular difference that the contemporary Church has lost the capacity to regenerate or 'reinvent' itself as it has been able to do before. One wonders whether the laudable developments in contemporary spirituality are more indebted to the spirit of postmodernism than the initiatives and theologising of the Church?

3.4 Evangelical, Mystical, Postmodern?

Following the present heading ('a Christian experience') somewhat pedantically and with overtones of piece-meal literalism one may ask in what sense the *new* meaning given to experience (as opposed to 'a Christian experience') fits the designation of a distinctively *Christian* experience. Notwithstanding the possible *angst* of conservative evangelical schools, it must be said that Christian spirituality is undoubtedly fed by mystical and postmodern streams. It is the mystery and sense of unprescriptive permission in postmodernism and the mystical tradition that has given new life to Christian spirituality, even if this sounds like an anomaly in certain quarters. Some theologians are more accommodative of mysticism's contemporary influence, but not without real un-ease. Bloesch (2007:137-138), for example, expresses concern about 'an unresolved tension' between two strands of Christian spirituality—that is to say, two ways of experiencing God. These strands, for him, are represented by the evangelical and mystical traditions. He speaks of the (at least potential) erosion of biblical personalism through the influence of a de-personalised mysticism. Of course, biblical personalism is here represented by the evangelical strain. Thus, the subject of mysticism needs to be treated with care if it is not to devolve into a scripturally orphaned divine impersonalism. Bloesch (2007:86) thus advocates a theology of Word and Spirit, as opposed to the inherent leanings of mysticism to impersonalism. Indeed for Bloesch it seems that the word 'mysticism' is better left alone altogether, where 'Spirit' is substituted for it. Regardless of such apologetic theological concerns, however, it is clear that the new dynamic within Christian spirituality is in no small part energised by a reclamation of Christian mysticism. Of course, with the attribution of *Christian* superseding the word 'mysticism' Bloesch (2007:137) has less

problems. One senses, though, that for him it is a reluctant concession[5]. In many ways Bloesch belongs to the cautionary school of 'spiritual theology,' which fears a renegade and subjective impersonalism, loosened from the moorings of sound Christian revelation. While this particular concern naturally pertains to 'lived life' spirituality it is a debate that comprises the nucleus of contention in academic spirituality as well. Can the new interest in spirituality, for example, serve as an impetus for a self-sustained department of spirituality in the university academy, including Christian spirituality within its department? On the other hand, is Christian spirituality merely a sub-division of the theology department? It seems to Schneiders (1986:264), for instance, that Christian spirituality has essentially earned its stripes for admission into a new department, of spirituality. Such spirituality, whether Christian or otherwise, then creates its own informed, inter-disciplinary theory, rather than being a subordinate of systematic-theological imperialism.

With more immediate respect to our sub-heading, however, it is important to note the different tributaries running into what is renascent about the flow of Christian spirituality, or experience of God, especially in the last two and a half decades. More troubling for some will be the way that the contemplative, decentralised and less 'dogmatised' renewal in spirituality does not lend itself easily to comfortable categories of the past. This does not mean, though, that contemporary Christian experience of this kind is necessarily adrift. Rather it might mean that people are coming to personal, owned experience of God in the only way they can in the present era. In addition, the kind of experience evident in emerging Christian spirituality, while risky in some real respects, is able to offer a critique of comfortable Christian enclaves or ideologies, particularly some of the 'isms,' not least

[5] For Methodists of a strong Wesleyan persuasion the reminder that John Wesley, although showing some interest in the mystics and drawing from them, also evidenced ambivalence thereto, will introduce some wariness amongst the purists. More seriously, Bloesch (2007:138) reminds us that the esteemed Methodist forefather attested to nearly making shipwreck of his faith on account of the writings of the mystics.

those of evangelical-ism and mystic-ism[6]. This will open up some Christian breathing space. Hopefully postmodern-ism will also fall under such unilateral critique.

4 Experience and Immanence

It was said earlier in relation to 'a Christian experience' that a postmodern Christian spirituality in the main offered an experience of a different kind, given the malleability or even expendability of the word experience. Such experience relates to a new perception, an illumination, and an enchantment of all that is. If the cutting edge of contemporary Christian spirituality shows us anything it is the possibility of experience of God through creation and material rootedness. This experience has less to do with supernaturalist divine intervention than with a decidedly new way of *looking* at the world and ourselves. From the contribution of Christian mysticism, furthermore, comes the sense of *participating* in God and in life within that perspective and awareness. Contrary to hackneyed terminology of 'letting God into one's life' spirituality now relates more to 'participating in God's life.'

Tacey (2004:78), speaking of the spirituality phenomenon, says: 'I am not imagining anything 'added on' to our lives from above, but rather a new dimension revealed to our understanding from below. This dimension is revealed to our sight when we 'see through' the mundane encasement of our lives to the mystery beneath, within and around us.' The experience so described, then, is more of an illuminated, contemplative perspective that is sustained on a continuum of awareness than a sudden opening of the sky and the descent of a dove. Tacey (2004:78) explains:

> We are not talking about direct or unmitigated experiences of a supernatural realm, personal communications with God, or first-hand sightings of angelic beings. Actually, I am not thinking about

[6] 'I confess to a growing disquiet about the time-honored term *evangelism.* When we refer to the good news of Jesus Christ as an *ism*, we are in danger of reducing it to an ideology…Instead of evangel*ism*, we should retain the verbal form, which is the way the term is used in the New Testament' (Gibbs 2005:39). Should we say the same of some other hallowed *isms* as well?

> anything metaphysical or magical at all, but something quite ordinary and existential. By spiritual experience I mean a deeper and more profound apprehension of our ordinary lives.

We would not be amiss in pointing out that Tacey speaks more of spirituality in general terms as a current world phenomenon than he does specifically of *Christian* spirituality. His thinking, however, accords well with the qualified description of 'experience' that seems to emerge from the true Christian mystical tradition. Neither should it surprise us that Tacey has *intra*-experience of the Christian Church in his own life, though certainly not without a critical stance. Furthermore it is precisely in this Christian mystical tradition that there is now a burgeoning interest within the domain of Christian academic thinking and lived life Christian experience.

Here again it must be observed that theology and spirituality use the language and concepts of their own context and era. That is to say, we should probably expect that a similar appreciation of divine immanence is also generally affirmed by the present postmodern spirit. 'Although different constructive postmodernists describe it with different nuances, most of them affirm a vision that can be called *naturalistic panentheism*, according to which the world is present in deity and deity is present in the world' (Griffin 1988:17). Whether Christian spirituality can subscribe to panentheism or not is at least controversial. But it need not so subscribe to draw benefit from such a turn to immanence. As one learns more about the crisis of our planet and the delicate inter-relation of everything, so spirituality has come to see that 'organised religion' has not had enough to say about the experience of the sacred in creation (Tacey 2004:36). The pre-modern archaic cosmology of intervention *from the outsid*e, inspired and informed by metaphysical presuppositions, seems far less credible in a postmodern society, of which Christians are, of course, in some real sense a part.

Neither should we too easily equate this newer sense of divine immanence with a former modernistic appreciation of creation where God is reflected on as the unmoved mover or cause of it all. It does seem that Christian spirituality (or *that* particular Christian spirituality uniquely manifested in the postmodern clime) attributes to materiality, nature and the human body an enchantment and sacramental sacredness that was not possible in modernism's more dualistic, mechanised and detached scientific

understandings. The earth, the body and materiality breathes with an organic life and mystery. This enchantment was apparently extinct in Descartes' (1596-1650) philosophy, as in the work of Newton (1642-1727), or the (pre-Darwinian) mathematician and theologian, William Paley (1743-1805)[7].

The trend to immanence in rediscovered (or reclaimed) Christian perception is convincingly attested to in various expressions of its contemporary spirituality. Feminist spirituality, for example, reclaims the sacredness of the human body, most especially in its affirmation of women and the mystery and sacredness of child-bearing and birth. Feminist spirituality, however, extends this wonder to all of life and even, in some works, understands the earth as an organic living thing, with all the inherent mystery and enchantment of the divine (McFague 1987). In this regard it has helpfully and insightfully challenged male-centred, over-cerebral approaches to theology. At the same time, in feminist usage of metaphor and analogy, it has shown imagination—and utilisation of a greater relational (divine-human) dynamic (McFague 1987). Creation spirituality, notably pioneered by Fox (1983), introduces a profound ecological earthiness to spirituality, with an imperative to take the cosmos seriously. He shows how a privileging of an exclusive salvation-history dispensationalism has in many ways undermined a broader spirituality that must encompass the entire universe—in short, a creation spirituality[8].

Each of these spiritualities, it must be said, work from a distinctively Christian perspective and therefore qualify for inclusion in the dynamism and ferment taking place in this new discourse and discipline. In the case of feminist thinking in particular the latter sentence is probably an

[7] 'With the rise of modern science, it became the generally accepted view that the universe was a giant machine, perhaps set up by God, but in any case a well-coordinated and predictable mechanism' (Solomon 1981:72). William Paley is best remembered for his image of the universe as a watch, left in automatic motion by a divine watchmaker.

[8] Interestingly, the philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960), bemoaned the fact that the Church had come to place its 'emphasis on history to the detriment of nature….When Nature ceases to be an object of contemplation and admiration it can then be nothing more than material for an action which aims at transferring it' (Camus [1951] /1986:263).

understatement. Feminist spirituality, and the new perspective on life-experience that it brings, has in many respects led the charge in what is most exciting about new developments in both 'lived-life' and academic Christian spirituality.

5. Experience and Transcendence

Does the new leaning to immanence bring with it an erosion of the all-important dimension of divine transcendence as it relates to Christian experience? A submerging of transcendence into immanence cannot be laid at the door of postmodern Christian spirituality. What is in evidence, rather, is a reinstatement of the mystery, otherness and essentially ineffable being of God, which in turn invites personal discovery and the internalising of one's own spirituality. We should perhaps not rue the fact that this initiative is in contrast to the unthinking pre-digestion of ecclesiastic dogma, which runs the risk of bringing premature closure to authentic experience of the divine.

Again, personal discovery and the need to experience the divine for *oneself* concur with the general spirit of postmodernism. Such postmodernism invariably celebrates diversity of approach and experience, and a sharp partiality to one-way authority directives—that is, to a hand-me-down *modus operandi* all too often identified with the Church.

If a more contemplative, mystical spirituality, however, does not undermine transcendence it does probably invite a reworking of it in some respects. In other words, a decidedly cosmological or metaphysical transcendence that may lead to an objectifying of the divine would find itself ill-matched with the post-modern growing edge of Christian spirituality. Indeed, a value or quality-driven *ontological* transcendence may better fit the part, or even a qualified *epistemological* transcendence, especially as the growing edge of spirituality now places more stock in the 'knowing' dimension. The point is that transcendence can be 'secured' in different ways without surrendering the essential mystery and, paradoxically, the unknowability of God. The reclaimed 'checks' of the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* are theologically iconoclastic and serve the purpose of dismembering a kind of primordial objectivity. While this mystical contribution may frighten some purists it debatably has more going for it than older two-dimensional, dualistic paradigms. *Contemporary spirituality, thus understood, evidences a new readiness to appreciate the mystery and*

unknowability of God. Indeed, 'for those who do not share this (Christian) faith or who have been alienated from it because its proclaimers have seemed to 'know' too much, the starker journey into the divine darkness … may well offer a more compelling invitation to take a closer look at the Christian way' (Wiseman 1998:184).

Where is experience, then, in all of this? Given the indeterminacy of the word, not to mention theological suspicions already alluded to, one would say that experience here relates to a sense of personal journey, discovery and wonder. More than that it further relates to risk, testing and moving into the unknown—all concepts that are virtually synonymous with experience (Caputo 2005:23)[9]. Experience, in this view, has to do with stepping out as realisation of self-claimed faith, discovering the God who impossibly confounds all formal parameters and possibilities. It relates also to a sense of being incorporated into a ubiquitous God. The experience, furthermore, is ironically one of having no more to do with conjured or stereotypical religious experiences as if they particularly matter. Indeed, the view of pristine, unadulterated Christian mysticism seems to say that they invariably do not.

6 Experience and Academic Christian Spirituality

6.1 Spirituality as a Universal Experience

The exciting appearance in some academies of the discipline, Christian spirituality, is partly explained by a growing universal interest in spirituality.

[9] 'To have an experience is to have a taste for adventure, for venturing and risk, which is the meaning of the root *peira.* Thus to be a real 'empiricist' means not to sniff along the ground of experience like a hound dog but to search for opportunities, even perilous ones, like piracy (all of which have the same etymology' (Caputo 2005:23). Caputo defends the use of 'experience' in relation to God, defying Kant's (1724-1804) formal conditions when it is *God* who is at work. ''Experience' is the sort of thing that calls for God and the name of 'God' is the sort of thing that raises experience to its highest pitch. Anything that falls short of God will not have the bite of experience' (Caputo 2005:25).

The interest has sprung from the everyday *experiences* of diverse groups of people, whether of religious background or not. The word spirituality, though often used unthinkingly, is part of contemporary language. Spirituality races more pulses, it seems, than 'organised religion', which is fast acquiring pejorative status in connotation. The universal interest in spirituality (again, primarily the fruit of personal insightful experience) is significant for reflective Christian spirituality as inspiration and impetus in the latter's academic emergence and development. It does not stop there, though. Schneiders (1986), a Christian New Testament scholar, has spearheaded an argument for Christian spirituality falling under an even wider academic umbrella of a general spirituality academy. She formulates an all-purpose, user-friendly definition of spirituality *in general*. This spirituality-in-general refers to 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives' (1986:266)[10]. Her definition for *Christian* spirituality, itself a universal phenomenon, also has the ring of personal experience:

> We might define Christian spirituality as that particular actualization of the capacity for self-transcendence that is constituted by the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-giving relationship with God in Christ within the believing community. Thus Christian spirituality is trinitarian, christological, and ecclesial religious experience (Schneiders1986:266).

Perhaps the sense of experience is more pronounced in the second definition. But significantly, it is the experience of people, authenticated or made more

[10] What is debatably missing from this definition is the sense of otherness and external, numinous 'pull' that many people are experiencing. After all, there is surely some external energiser, imagined or otherwise, that moves and sustains the secondary experience of 'consciously striving', whatever name it/she/he be given. Does she go far enough in actually accounting for this almost postmodern religious *faith*, or sense of the numinous enchantment of reality? In defence of Schneiders, on the other hand, it *is* an all-purpose description that must speak for the widest audience.

plausible by their own sense of excited discovery, that conceives and further generates academic spirituality, in both its general and Christian understandings. Popular experience is taking a primary (if somewhat unprecedented) place in academic consideration. By the same token that is not to suggest that it is uncritically embraced in each instance.

6.2 Experience in Christian Scripture and Tradition

Commensurate with a postmodern shift to personal experience and validation is the revalorization, by academic Christian spirituality, of experience in its own Christian heritage and tradition. A ground-breaking exponent of academic spirituality writes that 'it is difficult to avoid the evidence of history that concrete spiritual traditions arise from Christian experiences or from the concrete realities of human existence rather than being derived from ideas and doctrines' (Sheldrake 1998:86). Christian experience pre-dates the scriptures and the subsequent reflection and coherence that scripture, tradition and theologising give to it. With that new-found appreciation comes the astute insight that the historical givenness of revelation is not presented in a dogmatised, reified way, but rather takes seriously, and incorporates, the human dimension of engagement on the experiential level. Earliest patristic theologising, moreover, had a greater dimension of holism and experiential involvement than later categorisation of theology into discrete sections. This last-mentioned categorisation had the notorious effect of fragmenting theology, or delegating different disciplines with pronounced entitative functions: speculative-philosophic theology, morals, ascetic and mystical portfolios. Such dismemberment, in other words, did not correspond with the earliest tradition of doing theology. The price paid for such formalisation was the rupture of what is essentially all-of-a-piece, or more precisely here, an inevitable marginalisation (and even denigration) of experience. Conversely, the speculative and philosophic domains of theology went into the ascendancy. A false distinction between 'mystical theology' and other forms of academic theology clouded theology's experiential core (George 1994:11). Johnson (1996:168) contends that 'Christianity has never been able to 'prove' its claims except by appeal to the *experience* and *convictions* of those already convinced' [italics mine]. He goes on to say that '[t]he claims of the gospel cannot be demonstrated logically. They cannot be

proved historically. They can be validated only existentially by the witness of authentic Christian discipleship' (Johnson 1996:168). One feels that Johnson makes an important contribution (as do many other scholars in various theological disciplines) to revisioned Christian spirituality. More than that, he shows how the Gospel and its experiential foundation can meet the postmodern mind with an intelligible message—and even a καιρος moment.

In addition to scriptural tradition, the long history of asceticism and mysticism provides important experiential material for academic spirituality's reflection, scrutiny and theory-formation. Of critical importance for the advent of spirituality is the way that Vatican Council II became the major efficient cause for reconciliation of asceticism and mysticism. This merger made mysticism universally accessible, de-regulating mysticism's previously unfortunate aura of privilege and eliticism. With this merger there came into being the possibility of spirituality as such, as opposed to the dogmatically controlled spiritual theology. Thus spirituality opened up the world of experiential legitimacy in a way that spiritual theology could not do.

6.3 The Academy: Nemesis for Experience?

It is important to acknowledge a final nuance integral to 'experience'—or, by association, to spirituality. Experience is sometimes a red flag to universities, who after all want to be scientific. Theological scholars typically fear the surrender of revelation to subjective experiences. Other faculties, along similar lines, have grave doubts about securing critical distance for such an experientially loaded field. After all, universities are not theological seminaries, which presumably have more parochial sympathies with experiences of such kind, if indeed they do not expect them in some cases. This will clearly not do in the courts of scientific learning. In this sense, then, experience occupies a highly significant and problematic place in spirituality's aspirations for academic status. An instance of *theological* disagreement on the issue of university status for spirituality is clearly apparent in the affirmative advocacy of Schneiders (1986) on the one hand and the less convinced Hanson (1990:50) on the other. Hanson is of the opinion that experience of necessity involves 'a strong existential concern to grow

in faith', which must disqualify spirituality as an over-invested interest group.

The contestation is real, and the subject highly freighted, bearing *inter alia* the stances of a resilient rationalism on the one hand and the perspectival, epistemological challenges thereto of Hume (1711-1776), Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831) on the other. Together with the last-mentioned challenge might be the further enhancement for spirituality of the postmodern climate. Here the underlying ethos is far less hierarchical and rationalistic. Postmodernism typically disassembles established structures and exercises a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' once more (Tarnas 1991:401). But whether spirituality justifies inclusion in the academy (or should be happy to do so) solely on the grounds of favourable postmodern climate is a moot point. Rather one would think that the matter is more complex than that. Spirituality has also built up a considerable, consistent literature and resource through the centuries. It is even possible that the uneasiness with experience is the death rattle of old university annexations and hierarchies that cannot survive the increasing diversification of a more specialised world. In any case, one must not speak too self-assuredly about experience but rather try to understand its own dynamic and dialectic. Can spirituality not be productive of its own unique, inter-disciplinary theory of experience?

7 Conclusion

Contemporary Christian spirituality has less to do with a pointed supernaturalist experience of God or Christ as with the experience of seeing all of reality with a new, contemplative and illuminated sight or perspective. Spirituality thus gives expression to experience less as a punctiliar inbreaking of God and more as a continuum of experience in a new kind of reality and contemplative epistemology. The sense of linear participation is far greater than experiences of punctiliar or staccato inbreakings 'from the outside'. Still, while God is experienced in terms of immanence, the transcendence of God is secured. Christian spirituality is happy with transcendent mystery; with awe, wonder and discovery as opposed to dogmatic closure. These experiences make sense given the postmodern climate and world view, but should not be dismissed on those contextual grounds.

Academic Christian spirituality is challenged and resourced by experience in three ways: First, there is the super-abundance of experiential spirituality to feed on and assess in society as a whole, often outside of the Church. Second, there is the perhaps not coincidental rediscovery of its own experiential heritage, both in early scriptural tradition and through the ages, but more recently in the post-Vatican II era. Finally, academic spirituality does battle with understandings of experience that would disqualify it from academic status. The battle for academic status goes on. However, there are signs that spirituality is a discipline whose time has come and that it has greater sophistication than its detractors appreciate.

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