# *Chapter 1*

# SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY: THE QUESTIONS AT ISSUE

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Two SS officers arrived at the door of a Carmelite convent in Holland. It was five in the afternoon on 2 August 1942. They had come to transport two of the sisters on a fateful journey; within a week the two had both perished at Auschwitz. Both nuns were Jews. One had been a leading intellectual in pre-war Germany, a graduate assistant to the highly influential phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, with a growing scholarly reputation of her own. Her name was Edith Stein (1891–1942). The other nun was her sister by birth, Rosa. At the moment of arrest, Rosa apparently began to grow deeply distressed. To comfort her sister, and perhaps the rest of her convent, Stein is reported to have taken her sister by the hand and said, 'Come, Rosa. We're going for our people.'[1]

The afternoon of the arrest, Edith Stein was working on her study of a major mystical writer, John of the Cross (1542–91).[2] In fact she was at the point of discussing John's death when she was called away to her own. John had developed a highly nuanced understanding of the soul's abandonment into the darkness of an unknown and imperceptible divine presence. Stein's analysis of this spiritual trajectory had now reached the point of intersection with her own spiritual journey, and it is most appropriately at this crossing that this book begins – at the point where the integrity of spirituality and theology is made manifest.

Was Edith Stein a spiritual writer or a theologian? The explicit dichotomy of this question is undone by the unflinching integrity with which Stein held these two elements of her vocation together. Her work as an interpreter of major theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*c.*500), Thomas Aquinas (*c.*1225–74), and John of the Cross was all of a piece with her spirituality. The mysterious beckoning of divine love in Stein's life led her out

of herself towards the other, both the divine other and the human other, and especially the divine by way of responsibility for the human other: 'Come, Rosa. We're going for our people.' Her *theological* understanding of what she saw as the self-sacrificing pattern of divine life grew increasingly more incarnate in her own *spiritual* stance. She repeatedly articulated her belief that a spirituality of compassion and responsibility for others enabled one to contribute in some limited personal way to the unlimited self-giving that she understood to be constitutive of God's existence – a self-giving embodied for her in the history of Jesus. On at least three occasions she made official requests to her superiors to offer herself 'as a sacrifice of atonement' for peace and for the deliverance of her fellow Jews.[3] Her theological perceptions and her spirituality of self-giving love represented the theoretical and the practical forms respectively of one unified journey of encounter with God.

The themes manifest in Stein's life are issues at the heart of this book. How can one best understand the relationship of theology and spirituality? How have they grown so far from one another? What would their integration mean for contemporary theology? In the time of Edith Stein and perhaps since that time the usual definitions of spirituality and theology as separated disciplines seem less persuasive. This may be, therefore, an appropriate moment for questioning the status quo of their divorce. It has been suggested that the name we often give to this era – postmodernity – was born in Auschwitz, out of the death of the old certainties about reason as purely discursive rationality, about history as progressing according to some clear and coherent narrative, about truth as the supposed adequacy of propositions to purely objective entities.[4] All these old verities of modernity demanded for their pure observance a harsh and pristine separation of thought from feeling, form from content, and most devastatingly, theory from practice. In the maelstrom of the twentieth century such clinical divisions of existence have come to seem dangerously naive, repressive of wholeness, and hopelessly flatfooted in negotiating both the traumas and the possibilities of real life. Perhaps today the grounds upon which spirituality and theology were clinically isolated from each other no longer exist. It was doubtful whether we could ever afford to maintain such a division in any case. The question now is whether we may find, in such examples as Edith Stein, the pattern for the re-weaving of spirituality and theology.

It may seem, however, that another kind of division is being tacitly endorsed here. Precisely because I am concerned in this book with the integrity of spirituality and theology within Christianity, I will not be able (even were I appropriately equipped) to pay attention to the spiritualities of other religious traditions nor even to argue from analogies between the spirituality/theology relationship in those traditions and the Christian case.

Far from thinking that Christian theology can operate very adequately without reference to its global context, I am inclined to believe that other religious traditions, as contrasted with Western secular ideologies, are likely to become some of the most significant dialogue partners in Christianity's future. So I am hopeful that analogies between the spiritual practices and conceptual patterns of Christianity and those of other religions will emerge in continuing dialogue. I am unconvinced, however, that all actual religions are limited cultural articulations of a supposedly deeper, universal common core of truth – which some scholars seem able to liberate from its allegedly constraining formulations in particular religions. The agenda of such scholarship seems little different from the missionary aims of previous centuries, namely the conversion of the benighted to a higher understanding; in this case, the 'higher religion' is usually one associated with post-Enlightenment Western academia. Generally speaking, I am concerned here to articulate the concrete particularities of Christian spirituality and theology as a basis for rediscovering their integrity, precisely because I doubt very much whether there *is* any such thing as spirituality or theology apart from their concrete historical life.

## Some Definitions

Now there are certain perils in proposing postmodernity as a frame for the discussion of spirituality and theology today. The postmodern is sometimes also conceived as the lazy pluralism of late capitalism, flying off into privatized 'lifestyles' lacking any common ground for the hard work of talking and working together. Certainly much that passes today for 'spirituality' smells suspiciously of just such a tendency. A quick tour of the local bookshop will likely display all these proclivities for individualistic quests for something 'inner' – inner self, inner child, even (in one case I noted recently) the inner wolf. In the consumerist consciousness of much of the northern hemisphere, such shopping for a private inner world seems to correspond all too well with the enormous growth of private security firms!

If spirituality were defined adequately in such terms, it would be hard to imagine how it might relate to theology, except as an object of rigorous analysis and critique. Perhaps it is a hallmark of pseudo-spirituality that it deals in escape, in avoidance of the reality of the other. This book will develop an understanding of spirituality as a discovery of the true 'self' precisely in *encountering* the divine and human other – who allow one neither to rest in a reassuring self-image nor to languish in the prison of a false social

construction of oneself. The truly life-bestowing other who beckons one into heightened wakefulness can also liberate one from the bitterly oppressive constructions of oneself enforced by dysfunctional families and broken societies. Understood in this sense, spirituality as the transformation and discovery of the self always happens in encounter, it is an activity constantly stirred up and sustained by the other who calls one out of one's 'self' and into the truth of one's mission in life, out of provisionality and into the adventure of incarnation.

I want to suggest, then, that spirituality so conceived is inherently oriented towards discovery, towards new perceptions and new understandings of reality, and hence is intimately related to theology. Perhaps one might think initially in terms of encounter with God as the common ground of spirituality and theology: spirituality being the impression that this encounter makes in the transforming life of people, and theology being the expression that this encounter calls forth as people attempt to understand and speak of the encounter.

Now how does this working definition of spirituality comport with the historical range of meanings that the term has acquired? Both Bernard McGinn and Philip Sheldrake have already provided lucid surveys of the historical permutations of 'spirituality' as a term.[5] The qualifier *pneumatikos* (spiritual) in the New Testament is obviously connected to the *pneuma* who is understood to be in Jesus and to be the gift of the risen Lord to the community. 'The "spiritual" is what is under the influence of, or is a manifestation of, the Spirit of God.'[6] It is important that in both the Pauline and later Christian writings 'the "spiritual person" (e.g., 1 Cor 2. 14–15) is *not* someone who turns away from material reality but rather someone in whom the Spirit of God dwells.'[7] It is worth noting two very significant points about the early Christian use of the term.

First, the spiritual is that dimension of life which is engendered and empowered by God; God is the primary agent who animates and releases new life and understanding in the believer. Spirituality, in other words, is not something the believer *has* but is a new pattern of personal growth taking place in the community of those who have been sought out, converted and cherished by the risen Christ. 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us . . . . We love because God first loved us' (1 John 4. 10, 19). Second, the spiritual is connected with the active presence of God and not primarily with extraordinary inner experiences, though God's presence may certainly arouse such feelings. Spirituality in this early sense, therefore, is not connected with the cultivation of particular interior experiences but with the new network of communal relationship and perception that the presence of

God makes possible for each spiritual person. John Zizioulas comments on this ecclesial matrix of spiritual life:

> The idea of new birth or birth in the Spirit was associated in the early church with baptism. The deeper meaning of baptism for Christian existence involved on the one hand a death of the 'old person,' that is, of the way in which personal identity was acquired through biological birth; on the other hand it involved a birth, that is, *the emergence of an identity through a new set of relationships, those provided by the church as the communion of the Spirit.*[8]

None of this means that the experience of an individual person was unimportant in this early conception of spirituality. What it means rather is that personal experience is not in itself the goal of spirituality. Individuals are not so much seeking to discover their own feelings as to live into the knowledge and love of God through the hard work of being members one with another of the Body of Christ. Spirituality in this early Christian sense is inherently mutual, communal, practical and oriented towards the God who makes self known precisely in this new pattern of life called church.

In the twelfth century the term *spiritualitas* (which translated the Greek *pneumatikos* and is the Latin precursor of our 'spirituality') came to be used not only in its early sense, as the power of God animating Christian life, but as whatever 'pertains to the soul as contrasted with the body'; and this new connotation lies behind 'those conceptions of spirituality which willy-nilly used it as the reason for giving the physical world and especially the human body a largely negative role in what they conceived of as authentic Christian life.'[9] This initiated a privatizing tendency in the history of Christianity. Spirituality came to refer to a highly refined state of the soul, with the focus on how one achieves such states of inner purity and exaltation. 'During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there seems to have been a gradual shift of "spirituality", both in Latin and in the vernaculars, toward signifying only the inner dispositions, the interior states of the soul.'[10] A moment of crisis occurred in 1695 with the condemnation of the allegedly Quietist teachings of the French spiritual writer, Madame Guyon (1648–1717). Her thought undoubtedly highlighted the drift towards spirituality seen in terms of interior states of being. Guyon's writings, with their recommendation of extreme resignation and disconnection from the external world, provoked a suspicion of spirituality as 'too refined, rarified and separated from ordinary Christian life'.[11]

Partly in reaction to the era of Madame Guyon, a new focus developed on the ordered theorization of the individual's struggle for perfection. And in

keeping with this neo-scholastic pursuit of order and classification there was a new terminological profusion. The term 'mystical theology' was appropriated from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Whereas for him the term referred to the 'knowledge' disclosed to Christians as they themselves are known and transformed by the unknowable God, now it comes to be used as a technical term for theoretical teaching about the soul's process of sanctification. Here was a double irony, for just as Madame Guyon's language about the utter *resignation* of the self was in fact an elaborate *rhetoric* of the self, so what might have seemed a turn away from this perspective (to the supposedly more scientific 'mystical theology') turns out to be a new and ever more baroque *technology of the self*.

Conceived in such a manner, spirituality could be safely categorized as a sub-specialization of moral theology, which, while important for the growth of the individual soul, could hardly be imagined to be a source of theological insight or discovery. The mystical dimension of the spiritual life remained even more isolated from theology: instead of being considered as the depth dimension of all spirituality, the *mystical* (as now distinct from the ascetical) came to be seen either as the revered and chilly reward of grace after untold ascetical struggle or else as a suspect panoply of paranormal experiences and quirky behaviours. Indeed, the Dutch Carmelite Kees Waaijman remarks of modernity's attitude towards the mystical:

> It had to eliminate mysticism – precisely to the degree that mysticism lays bare man's inner powerlessness – as an unproductive element, often falsely labeled as quietistic, irrational, and occult. In reaction, mysticism – a living indictment against every form of self-interest, self-will, and technicalism – developed a language and a logic of its own which in turn rendered it unintelligible to cultural rationality.[12]

So the mystical dimension of Christian spirituality, that transforming knowledge of God which early Christian writers often saw as the very foundation of theology, grew ever more estranged from theology.

In this century the term 'spiritual theology' was often used interchangeably with ascetical/mystical theology, though it continued largely to describe the mechanics of the spiritual quest. By the middle of the century the term 'spirituality' was itself brought back into scholarly and, increasingly, popular usage. This development coincided with a much broader existential approach to spirituality, concerned to articulate believers' experiences of transcendence across all aspects of life and across ecumenical and religious boundaries. This contemporary notion of spirituality 'does not so much concern itself with

defining perfection as with surveying the complex mystery of human growth in the context of a living relationship with the Absolute."[13] While this more recent understanding of spirituality is much more flexible and open to many approaches of study – psychological, phenomenological, sociological and so on – its connection with theology remains problematic. Definitions of spirituality framed in such general terms as the human search for transcendence, fulfilment, and authenticity make it hard to distinguish spirituality from religion generally, or ethical life. As McGinn comments wryly: 'if spirituality is everything that is good and positive about what is human, then all it needs is a round of applause rather than cultivation and study.'[14]

While no one would want to discount the significance of experiential phenomena in the spiritual life, if these are seen as the defining features then spirituality seems to lose its theological voice. It becomes seen as a particularly powerful expression of human subjectivity. The analysis of spirituality in terms of that subjectivity washes out the theological implications of the subject's transformation – the trace of the divine other vanishes behind one or another aspect of human self-consciousness. So for example, Meister Eckhart's (*c.*1270–1327) teaching about the soul's 'breakthrough' into the divine ground would not be interpreted in terms of what this implies theologically about the remarkable relationship of human existence to infinite divine existence, but chiefly in terms of an ascent of the mind to a form of pure consciousness common to many religious traditions.

This approach is immensely (perhaps seductively) attractive, first because it permits the study of spirituality purely in terms of the human sciences, and hence seems to legitimize spirituality in the politics of academia. Furthermore its openness to an implicit commonality among religions is beguilingly ecumenical and modern. Indeed, it would be fair to say that this represents a growing consensus regarding the nature and proper study of spirituality. Whether such an approach is as inclusive as at first appears, or whether it tends to foreclose prematurely the possibility of spirituality's contribution to theological reflection, we must carefully consider.

## The Issues at Stake

In the last section I proposed thinking of spirituality as the new and transformative pattern of life and thought engendered in people by their encounter with God. In early Christianity we saw the communal matrix for this transforming process: spirituality as growth into a new network of relationships wherein the struggle to love the human other in all his or her

angularity and difference from oneself becomes the process by which one is drawn into the knowledge and love of God. The focus of later eras on the inner experiences aroused in this process of encounter gave rise to an ever more elaborate 'science' of the soul. This was conducted via neo-scholastic categories through the early part of the twentieth century and via more psychological and generally anthropological modes in the more recent period. This has led in varying degrees to an understanding of spirituality that is less transparent to the other who engenders the transformational process and hence less expressive as a source of theology. So before we consider the problems and the possibilities of the present state of the question, it will be useful to recall what exactly is at stake. Why is a divorce between spirituality and theology of concern anyway?

Put as bluntly as possible, theology without spirituality becomes ever more methodologically refined but unable to know or speak of the very mysteries at the heart of Christianity, and spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individualistic consumerism.[13] Part of the difficulty is that the ramifications of such a divorce are obscure until one sees the proper integrity of contemplative encounter and dogmatic theology; for apart from their mutual interaction the true functioning of each becomes easily misconceived. In other words, when a culture has grown used to the divorce between theology and spirituality, between doctrine and prayer, then the mutually critical function of the two breaks down. Neither is in sufficient dialogue with the other to keep it honest. And after a long period of such separation it becomes increasingly difficult to see what is missing in so much of the pale pretenders that pass fairly often for theology and spirituality today. But if one can catch sight of their natural interrelationship, then the problems inherent in their divorce become painfully apparent.

In his highly illuminating short paper on 'Theology and Spirituality', Andrew Louth quotes a telling passage from Thomas Merton:

> Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and 'spirituality', are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.[14]

So what is the natural relationship of spirituality and theology? Earlier I suggested that the two have their common ground in the believing community's encounter with God. Spirituality is the *impression* that encounter has in the continual transformation of the members of the church; theology is the *expression* of that encounter in the attempt to understand and tell something true of the mystery whom the believing community encounters.

Louth specifies this model further by reference to the activity of contemplation. Today we often use the term 'mysticism' though this is really something of an academic invention; earlier eras referred to the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as 'contemplation'. It is a term that holds together two elements we often see contrasted as though they were mutually exclusive, namely the affective or loving impulse and the intellectual or knowing impulse. Louth quotes the medieval mystical theologian Richard of St Victor (d. 1173): 'Contemplation is a free and clear vision of the mind fixed upon the manifestation of wisdom in suspended wonder.'[17] There are at least three vital points to note about this definition.

First, contemplation is not like normal thinking only muddled and tentative, on the contrary it is seen as an activity in which the mind is liberated to perceive clearly, freed from the usual constraints of distraction, self-preoccupation or prejudice. If what is perceived in the mind's clear vision is dark and mysterious this is not because pious emotions have muddled things to a murk, but because of the shocking intensity of the vision of reality that has broken through.

Second, the use of the term 'mind' here ought not to suggest that which is exclusively discursive, a manipulative rationalism that subjects whatever it encounters to its own control. The more classical notion of mind refers to the desire of our whole being for deep understanding and relationship with all that is intelligible. In this definition of contemplation, the mind's vision is said to take place in 'suspended wonder'. Now if, as I have just suggested, the activity of mind does not mean a rationalist manipulation of concepts, then for the mind to act in 'suspended wonder' does not entail some kind of abrogation of the mind or the Enlightenment's dreaded *sacrificium intellectus*, but rather the mind's profound engagement. If, for example, you are enraptured by the marvel of musical structure in Bach's *Two and Three Part Inventions* this does mean, it is true, that your mind is strongly inclined towards knowing these compositions, but it does *not* mean that your mind has ceased to reflect critically in the process; on the contrary the activity of the mind in 'suspended wonder' may be all the more intense, engaged and resourceful in analytical perceptivity.

Third, this understanding of contemplation says that *what* the mind is fixed

upon in clear vision by an act of suspended wonder is 'the manifestation of wisdom'. In other words, the contemplative act is not in the first instance a moment of especially excited feelings, though these may be involved; it is rather an event of being grasped by the self-disclosure of wisdom. Contemplation is not particularly concerned with the inner states of the contemplative (however interesting, unusual and worthy of study they may be in their own right), but with the breaking through of wisdom into the contemplative's consciousness. This is one of those subtle differences that matters enormously. First because it makes clear that the whole event of contemplation is not primarily something that one does but that one is invited into. Second, to speak of contemplation as the breaking through of wisdom makes clear that the event of contemplation issues in new *understanding*, a new encounter with wisdom. It is inherently theological.

The point of all this elucidation is to give us a common frame of reference for asking the question: What is at stake in the divorce of spirituality and theology? For, if we return to Louth with this notion of contemplation in mind, we begin to see the natural relationship of spirituality and theology and the implications of their separation. 'It is in *contemplation* that theology and spirituality meet. Theology is one of the fruits of contemplation, the attempt to express and articulate what is perceived in this "free and clear vision"; spirituality is the preparing of the soul for contemplation. And contemplation, in this sense, is not something we can attain.'[8] Louth would not, I think, mean to imply that spirituality is something we simply decide to have a go at but rather that it is itself (from the very first stirring of desire to pray) engendered within us by the beckoning of God's address to humanity. In such a view, spirituality is intrinsically oriented towards theology and theology is organically emergent from spirituality. They are related to each other as the preparation for and articulation of the event of contemplation, the most intimate encounter with God.

This being so, their separation from one another is mutually debilitating. At first glance it might seem that spirituality is not necessarily affected; after all, it is theology that depends on spirituality as its source. Yet in real life we have no 'freeze frame' picture to deal with, but a living community of prayer and reflection. If the contemplative's encounters are dismissed as so much 'devotion' which can have no place in academic theology, then a significant public forum for mystical insight is closed. The call to unfold the communal, theological import of the contemplative event is no longer heard by the mystic. In such a case, it would hardly be surprising if 'the mystic's world became increasingly private, subjective, psychological, and ascetic'.[9]

Christians such as Gregory of Nyssa (*c.*330–*c.*395) or Augustine (354–430)

were able, prior to this tendency to separate spirituality and theology, to find 'the appropriate dogmatic clothing for their very personal experience; everything became objective, and all the subjective conditions, experiences, fears, strivings, the "shock" in a word, were made to serve a fuller understanding of the content of revelation'.[20] We might almost say that the ability to discern and formulate the meaning of mystical encounter is something that must be acquired, like a skill, and that without a culture in which such a skill is forged and fostered it may be lost. Take, for example, the case of the great mystical theologian Julian of Norwich (*c.*1342 – after 1416). According to her own report, on the night of 13 May 1373, in her thirtieth year, she was very near the point of death when she received fifteen 'showings' from God. But her now famous book, the *Revelations of Divine Love*, with all its fertile theological analyses of human existence, the meaning of Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity, was the product of a long, hard, struggle of elucidation. This theological fruitfulness was the result of twenty years rumination on what might have remained purely private spiritual experiences. Throughout her work, Julian is aware that her effort of theological articulation may receive a frosty reception. The ecclesiastical and academic culture of her era was already less than open to the insights of someone situated far from the impressively authoritative halls of the university – and a woman at that.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has suggested that mystical thinkers in later eras became so conditioned by this isolation of academic goals from contemplative life that they no longer thought of making the effort that Julian did, nor would they perhaps have had the skill to achieve what she accomplished.

> The saints, intimidated by the conceptual entanglements drawn round the gospel truth, no longer dare to collaborate in the necessary work of exposition of doctrine, or think themselves qualified to do so. They leave dogma to the prosaic work of the School, and become – lyrical poets. But just as poetry has developed from an objective art interpreting reality, the conception of the Greeks and Romans, to a subjective art describing inner states, the expressionistic and impressionistic art of modern times, so also have the saints come to speak a religious language which is not dogmatic. Or else they obey instructions and respond to demands made on them, which are more and more of a subjective and psychological nature. The saints in modern times are required to describe the way in which they experienced God, and the accent is always on experience rather than on God.[21]

It is not, in other words, simply the fault of the contemplative that spirituality loses its theological voice; this is a part of larger cultural shifts (particularly in

the academic version of theology) that redirect persons of prayer away from the public reception of their insights.

The problem with this separation from theology is that it tends to disorientate spirituality, to deprive it of some stable communal goal and reference, and hence render it susceptible to the idols, compulsions, or fears of the individual. There is another danger as well: the intensity of mystical experience can easily lead to a kind of absolutism that oppresses the lives of mystics themselves or of cultures receptive to them. Theology reminds spirituality that 'interpretation is intrinsic to experience'.[22] And therefore every spiritual consciousness must be contextualized and appraised in terms of its context; claims to a putatively absolute experience, free from the interpretive matrix of one's cultural location are always problematic.

Yet my primary concern in this book is the challenge that spirituality issues to theology for, apart from its spiritual source, theology tends to enervation and desiccation. In his presidential address to fellow theologians of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Michael Buckley asked very pointedly,

> is it not extraordinary that so much Catholic formal theology for centuries, its divorce between spirituality and fundamental and dogmatic theology, has bracketed this actual witness [the spiritual experiences of holy lives] as of no cogency. . .? Is it not a lacuna in the standard theology, even of our day, that theology neither has nor has striven to forge the intellectual devices to probe in these concrete experiences the warrant they present for the reality of God and make them available for so universal a discipline?[23]

Buckley and others have submitted that the divorce between spirituality and theology at the very least involves a serious 'lacuna', and this in two respects. First there is simply the problem of a gap in theology's sources. As spirituality and theology have each grown more focused on particular dimensions of their respective spheres (inner experience on one hand and the criteria of 'scientific' scholarship on the other), theology has correspondingly felt less sure of what exactly to do with either the spiritual life of theologians themselves or with the lives and texts of spiritual writers. 'The questions that Christianity's mystics raise for theology visibly embarrass too many academic theologians.'[24] From the concrete patterns of a saintly life to the particular imagery of a mystical text, the vast range of spiritual sources available to theology can hardly be ignored if theology is to do its job of articulating a critical understanding of the faith community's beliefs. So for example, it would seem peculiar to analyse the meaning of Jesus Christ without reference to that unfolding realization of his

significance embodied in the life of a martyr or the consciousness of a mystic especially if they have each intentionally defined their mission in terms of participation in Christ.[25]

The other aspect of this lacuna is that, as von Balthasar suggested, theologians cut off from spirituality may not only lose contact with important sources of religious reflection but may also lose the proper skills for speaking of the doctrines of Christianity – doctrines conceived not simply as propositions for analysis but as living mysteries to be encountered. This is not a call for theology to cloak its bafflements with an unctuous tone of voice or, as Paul Tillich once warned against, 'to fill in logical gaps with devotional material'.[26] Quite the opposite, spirituality calls theology to an honesty about the difficulty of understanding what is unfathomable (that 'suspended wonder' spoken of by Richard of St Victor), an openness to what is never a puzzle to be solved but always a mystery to be lived. The question is whether, apart from spirituality, theology remembers very well how to do this, to discern the nature of the mystery – *and* to leave others not simply in reliance on the theologian's words but to lead them well enough in the right direction that believers may truly enter into transforming understanding themselves.

This brings us to what is perhaps the deepest concern, namely that when theology is divorced from spirituality it is likely to begin talking about a different god, a deity who depends on theological performance for vitality and verisimilitude. If I spend any length of time describing someone I've met to a friend, pretty soon my description begins to be the defining framework within which both I and my friend will consider this other person. Yet the description is not the reality and it tends easily to usurp the place of the concrete human being on whom it depends. Apart from continuing reflection on the transforming encounter with God, it is easy enough for me as a theologian to forget that the divine 'object' of my study is never simply that but always the living self-disclosing ground of my own understanding. God is always the source of all other agency. Yet my theological exposition of God may have all the liveliness of a laboratory specimen – and then I may begin thinking about God in those terms even without realizing it. The God I want to talk about imperceptibly becomes an object susceptible to the intricate theories I propound. Surely it is right for theology to offer as clear and critical an exposition of God's reality as possible. The perilous possibility is that theology, apart from spirituality, may be fooled by its very success as a human discourse into talking about a reality who is no longer the acting subject of self-disclosure. What kind of god does theology divorced from spirituality end up describing?

By way of an example of the problem, one might recall the laborious

patience with which Cleanthes in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* struggles to construct an enlightened understanding of God. Just as we can note the construction of an elegantly designed building, observes Cleanthes, and infer from that something of the existence and nature of the architect, so close examination of the miraculous harmony of the universe points us quite reasonably to the beneficent divinity who is its 'architect'. From this theological perspective, any advertence to the community's spiritual encounter with the living presence of God is a distraction (possibly a dangerous one since not every right-thinking person can be assumed to have had the same spiritual experiences). Michael Buckley traces the intricate patterns of just such arguments wherein the community's spiritual encounter with the living Christ is banned from the discussion as an improperly sectarian and devotional line of thought. Speaking of the development of modern theology into the eighteenth century, Buckley writes: 'In the absence of a rich and comprehensive Christology and a Pneumatology of religious experience Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian god without appeal to anything Christian.'[7] And indeed, in Hume's little theological tragi-comedy, Cleanthes's effort is pulled to pieces by the sceptical Philo. The deity your theological reasonings have arrived at, says Philo to Cleanthes, might very well turn out to be a strange god, rather different indeed from the Christian assumptions which you have left so politely unspoken. Separated from the interpretive framework of the spiritual encounter with God, the world is hard to judge. Perhaps the universe, says Philo, 'was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it', or perhaps it is 'the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death has run on at adventures'.[8]

Cleanthes's theological edifice, with all its doors firmly shut against the community's experience of God's mystery in Christ, has become a trap – within which no encounter with the living reality of God is possible. Herbert McCabe puts it with his customary acuity:

> If we are to enter into the mystery of God it is not information that we need, and in principle we could not have information – our language and concepts break down in the presence of God. What we need is to be taken up by God himself, to share in his knowledge of himself, a sharing that to *us* must just look like darkness. So that our faith seems not like an increase of knowledge but, if anything, an increase in ignorance. We become more acutely aware of our inadequacy before the mystery as we are brought closer to it. So it is God's initiative that is needed. Not that we should speak more about him, but that *he* should speak to us.[9]

This is the perspective of theology rooted in spirituality, of theology growing organically out of God's own knowing and speaking of Godself.

So while it is very true that theology provides an indispensable critical function for spirituality, it is no less true that spirituality affords a radically critical perspective equally necessary for the health of theology. How easy it is for theologians to evade the hard question, 'Who is God?'. Who is this God who makes self known in the intimate helplessness of an infant born all untimely to poor people and the forsakenness of one being executed as an enemy of the state? Where does theology venture in its task of searching for critical understanding of this God? Will it risk exposure with the faithful women at the foot of the Cross, or does it seek more secure and acceptable (more academically respectable?) company? Spirituality grounds theology ever anew in this place of human waiting and speechlessness at the foot of the inestimable speaking of God. It is true that what takes place there defies human understanding and would hence seem to defeat the purpose of theology; yet the hope with which spirituality imbues theology enables it to persevere there, to wait not for a clever resolution of its own, but for the 'theology' that God articulates in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead: 'So spirituality – prayer – is, I suggest, that which keeps theology to its proper vocation, that which prevents theology from evading its own real object. Spirituality does not exactly answer the question, Who is God? but it preserves the orientation, the perspective, within which this question remains a question that is being asked rather than a question that is being evaded or elided.'[30] Perhaps we might say simply that spirituality contextualizes theology in the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising which is God's self-disclosure and therefore the matrix of honest theological reflection.

The critical function which spirituality serves for theology is not a matter simply of adding one more source for theology to consider; it is not a matter of judiciously taking people's *experiences* seriously along with supposedly more 'rational' thought, but a matter of exposing theology to the profound questioning that animates the very heart of the community's struggle to be faithful. In the words of Rowan Williams:

> The questioning involved here is not our interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us. It is the intractable *strangeness* of the ground of belief that must constantly be allowed to challenge the fixed assumptions of religiosity. . . . And the greatness of the great Christian saints lies in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the centre of their faith.[31]

It is spirituality's vocation, in countless struggles and whole lives, in acts of compassion and contemplation, in mystical texts of every kind, to be drawn out of provisionality into real life precisely by this divine questioning at its centre. It is this questioning that spirituality carries within itself ('always carrying in the body the death of Jesus' [2 Cor 4.10]) as its animating source. Apart from constant exposure to that questioning, theology risks losing touch with the very God who has given it life. 'One will not long believe in a personal God with whom there is no communication, no interaction.'[32]

## Problems and Possibilities Today

The current state of the relationship of spirituality and theology depends of course on a long history of interaction, but there are also contemporary factors that shift the terms of the discussion. Many of these relate to massive cultural shifts, the study of which is quite beyond the scope of this book. There is for example the apparently growing disparity of resources between regions of the world; the desperately poor have a spirituality of their own, of survival in the face of brutal daily violence and appalling need.[33] As these forms of spirituality become known in their practices and texts, how will theologians react? In other parts of the world, an abundance of material resources and the banalization of life have led to a new quest for popular spirituality that is highly consumerist and individualist in orientation. Best selling books on angels, 'near-death' experience and a ritual use of 'crystals' are merely the more glamorous items in a search for sacred personal totems. Is this popular mentality a new form of spirituality that will endure across and beyond all boundaries of institutional religions (as the 'New Age' movement), or is it more like a faddish expression of cultural boredom? Whatever the answer, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that institutional religions have often failed to invite people into the depths of their own spiritual traditions as sources for inner growth and self-transcendence. How exactly do these and similarly wide-ranging cultural crises or shifts (e.g., the growth of fundamentalisms) shape the context in which spirituality and theology interact today? At the very least we could say that theologians will not want to work in ignorance of such features of the cultural landscape. The question is how to sift and appraise in constructive acts of theology such disparate and massive spiritual trends. There are, however, two other factors more easily construed within the scope of this book which are already shaping the relationship between spirituality and theology.

### *Spirituality as an academic discipline*

Until now I have talked of spirituality primarily in terms of the lived encounter with God. Yet one of the most salient features of the contemporary discussion is not only steadily rising *popular* interest in spirituality, but the emergence of a revised *academic* discipline that studies spirituality. How is this related to spirituality as living encounter and what are its implications for the integrity of spirituality and theology? In three important articles Sandra Schneiders, a founder and director of one of America's leading graduate academic programs in the study of spirituality, has proffered her views on spirituality as an academic discipline and its relationship to theology.[34] Because of the influential perspectives enunciated by Schneiders it will be worthwhile considering her views carefully.

Schneiders usually offers two, sometimes three, dimensions to her use of the term 'spirituality'. First, just as one says that a person has a certain 'psychology', a shape or pattern to their psychic life, so one could well say that every human being has a spirituality, that is, a 'fundamental dimension of the human being'.[35] Hence, in her view, 'the primary application of the term spirituality is to that dimension of the human subject in virtue of which the person is capable of self-transcending integration in relation to the Ultimate, whatever the Ultimate is for the person in question.'[36] Note the polarity evoked in this description: spirituality in itself is an aspect of the human subject, yet it is precisely that dimension of the human which is oriented towards self-*transcendence*; or again, the integration of the human subject is the telos of spirituality, yet that integration is achieved not solipsistically but 'in relation to the Ultimate'. The second form of usage Schneiders highlights is 'the lived experience which actualizes' one's spirituality.[37] So Schneiders would have us distinguish at least theoretically between spirituality as an inherent feature of human existence and the particular processes by which this possibility moves towards fulfilment. The third way in which she sees the term used is in reference to 'the experimental and theoretical study of human efforts at self-transcending integration and to the pastoral practices aimed at fostering the spirituality of individuals and groups'.[38]

The inescapable trajectory of these terminological clarifications is towards a notion of spirituality as *innate human aspiration towards ultimacy*. 'In short, spirituality refers to the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation or self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives.'[39] There is a very good reason, in Schneider's view, for highlighting the innately human status of spirituality.

As we saw above in considering the history of the term, spirituality was

treated (from the beginning of the modern era) as a sub-discipline of dogmatic or moral theology; in that conception, spirituality derives its principles directly from revelation and follows these as norms in working towards Christian perfection beyond the level of the basic morality required of all. Schneiders rightly views this earlier conceptuality as out of touch with a more existential outlook in theology, and as quite removed from 'most of what ordinary people are talking about' when they use the word.[40]

This explains her preference for what she forthrightly calls an 'anthropological' approach in which 'the structure and dynamics of the human person as such are the locus of the emergence of the spiritual life.'[41] Besides opening the door for a wide interdisciplinary range of scholarship to participate in the study of spirituality (hence integrating it more widely in the university setting), this anthropological approach has the advantage of leaving the ultimate value towards which the subject is striving as an open space which can be filled in quite differently depending on one's religious preference or non-religious perspective. I agree that these are advantages in fostering the study of spirituality in a contemporary academic setting. My question at this point is whether the theological effect of this approach is quite so unproblematic as may appear.

Schneiders herself rightly warns against an obvious false step; namely the assumption that one could ever have an academically convenient 'spirituality in general' available for study and theorization, such that the particularities of a given religious (or secular) form of spirituality might be allowed to fade in favour of what are, allegedly, the deeper values or patterns hidden at the heart of all spiritualities.

> There is no such thing as 'generic spirituality.' Spirituality as lived experience is, by definition, determined by the particular ultimate value within the horizon of which the life project is pursued. Consequently, it involves intrinsically some relatively coherent and articulate understanding of both the human being and the horizon of ultimate value (i.e., in Christian terms, theology), some historical tradition, some symbol system, and so on.[42]

Even after she offers this admonition, however, Schneiders points out that 'by focusing on the common experience of *integrating self-transcendence within the horizon of ultimacy* one keeps open the possibility of dialogue among people of very different world views'.[43] Again, it seems to me perfectly useful to highlight patterns in spirituality that find analogies across religious or secular traditions, but this approach has deeper ramifications.

Schneiders accepts the role of theology (along with other disciplines such

as history, hermeneutical theory, psychology, etc.) in helping to construe spiritual texts or practices. She is also supportive of the intent to draw on spirituality as a theological source. But the anthropological approach outlined in her articles, with the most well-meaning intentions, seems likely to perpetuate the divorce between spirituality and theology. In identifying the human search for wholeness as the true subject matter of spirituality (as academic discipline), the anthropological approach would seem to render God peripheral. Whatever ultimate value orients any given spiritual life would be very useful to know about, rather as it is useful to know about a spiritual seeker's historical setting – interesting points, no doubt, but once clarified, issues not really at the heart of the matter. Clearly this is going to make it hard to highlight the theological implications of spirituality, since all the details of the spiritual journey are going to be read as data of human experience, while their polyvalence as signs of the divine in the transformation of human life might easily be left unexplored.

Furthermore, who is this wonderfully transcending self who happens to have an Ultimate Value of some kind as the reference for the self's higher integretation? The existence of such a self seems at least as much in doubt today as the existence of its mirror image: the autonomous, self-referential god of eighteenth-century deism. The notion that 'I' would even be able to understand myself *as* an I, apart from interaction with others, seems to be an outlook from which the mask is slipping to betray the questionable longings of the Enlightenment for a stable, order-imposing self. In other words, the whole project of an anthropological approach to spirituality seems to rest on a dubious metaphysical entity called the transcending self; indeed it is, ironically, every bit as dependent on this self as the older dogmatic approach to spirituality that it wishes to escape – the latter bustled this self off on a neo-scholastic progression to perfection, whereas the anthropological approach depends on an existentialist self which aspires towards wholeness. The very existence of such a self is, for postmodernity, very much in question. The anthropological approach to spirituality would seem to be a continuation of the post-Cartesian preoccupation with the individual subject, complete with its private mental states and experiences, so that it is exactly these fascinating experiences that become identified as one's 'spirituality' and are counted therefore as the subject matter for the academic discipline that studies spirituality. As Fergus Kerr remarks, however, participation in the real world constantly reminds us 'that we are agents in practical intercourse with one another – not solitary observers gazing upwards at the celestial realm of eternal forms, or inwards at the show in the mental theatre. *What constitutes us as human beings is the regular and patterned reactions that we have to one another.* It is in our

dealings with each other – in how we *act* – that human life is founded.'[44] It is for this reason that I proposed thinking of spirituality specifically in terms of encounter, spirituality as a form of life engendered and initiated by the other – the human other of the neighbour and the divine other whom I meet through my love for the neighbour. It is this beckoning of the other (and the response this beckoning elicits in us) that draws us from provisional existence into real life, into the unfolding of true personhood, and so ultimately into the most real form of life there is, namely the interpersonal trinitarian life of God.

The focal point in *this* view of spirituality as an academic discipline would not be the states of inner transcendence experienced by the self, but rather the patterns, structures and images that embody the beckoning of the other and the response this invitation evokes. We would ask what these features suggest about the one who initiates and sustains this process and about the one who comes to be as a result of the process. In fact, as our reading of mystical texts proceeds throughout this book, we will see that the whole scheme of inner subjectivity by which modernity has tended to interpret spirituality may need to be relinquished in favour of a more embodied and contextual model. We will consider mystical writers, for example, who evoke a play of mutuality in which the one who initiates (God) and the one who comes to be (human being) are drawn into a union that, paradoxically, does not deprive them of voice or face but constitutes them or identifies them ever more fully as persons.

Besides being less provincially bound by post-Cartesian mythologies of the self, this approach seems more congruent with the concerns of many of the spiritual and mystical writers themselves. As the historian of late medieval mysticism Paul Mommaers comments:

> The mystics themselves appear to be fascinated not by their own feelings but by *something* felt, by *someone* from without becoming present within. As a perceptual phenomenon, the mystical state no doubt testifies to a magnificent capacity of human consciousness. But this matters less to the mystic than who or what appears on the perceptual field. Consciousness is valuable not because of what it is but because of the other that it can experience as not identical with itself or at its disposal.[45]

Mommaers gives an example of the kind of subtlety with which this consciousness of the other is signalled within the human perceptual field, but not identical with that consciousness. Commenting on the remarkable use of the figure of love (*Minne*) in the writings of the Flemish poet and visionary Hadewijch (mid 1200s), Mommaers notes that while her experience of *Minne* is very personal, it is not simply an expression of inner feelings. *Minne* 'is not subjective in the

sense of valuing and enjoying the emotion of love as such. For Hadewijch, *Minne* as a movement of the soul is never detached from *Minne* as the Other who causes it. To feel love is to meet the Beloved."[16] Hadewijch is intensely aware of her transforming encounters, but it is not the feelings aroused in these encounters that interest her so much as the indication they give of the one who arouses them. The spiritual experience – in our usual sense of some sensation of inner feelings – is for her only a by-product of her participation in God, a manifestation in terms of her humanity of God's secret presence and activity.

Why is it that language about God or the cosmos so often comes to be interpreted as language about the self and its 'experiences'? In a profoundly insightful monograph, Denys Turner has pointed to some of the impulses at work in our constant tendency to treat the language of spirituality in a positivistic manner. Mystical writers again and again warn against paying much attention to religious feelings or preoccupation with various experiential states. Such writers do this by using imagery of withdrawal, darkness, inner abandonment and so on. But their interpreters very often mistake this imagery for a kind of literal report of, or prescription for, actual religious experience. The language of negativity in spiritual texts, intended as a critique of all religious experience, is read as encouragement to pursue the achievement of negative *experiences*. If a mystic said for example that, 'Darkness is the only way to God', the experientialist interpreter takes this to mean that one must seek some inner state of 'darkness', rather than hearing it as a warning against reliance on particular beliefs, aspirations, feelings, or idols of any kind whatsoever in the encounter with the living God.

> Experientialism is, in short, the 'positivism' of Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic [the way of negation], rushing in to fill it with the plenum of the psychologistic. It resists the deconstructions of the negative way, holding fast to supposititious experiences *of* the negative. It is happy with commendations of the 'interior' so long as it can cash them out in the currency of experienced inwardness and of the practices of prayer which will achieve it.[17]

The anthropological approach to spirituality as described in Schneiders's articles seems unintentionally open to this manner of distortion – not just in regard to this or that mystical text, but to the phenomena of spirituality as a whole. What an irony it would be if the academicians finally allowed the return of spirituality as a conversation partner in the university, only to consign it – as did many late medieval ecclesiastical and university authorities – to a non-theological realm labelled, appropriately, 'private devotion'.

### *Feminist and liberation perspectives*

Another major development that shapes how we consider these issues today is much broader than the disciplinary question we have been looking at. It is the new perspective brought to theological studies by developments in liberation and feminist thought. A number of important insights have been crystallized in these areas of theology. Perhaps most broadly construed, the central vision has to do with the overcoming of modernity's impulse to isolate theory from practice, and to regard the former as theologically preeminent. Feminist and liberationist religious perspectives have recovered a fundamental assumption of earlier eras; namely, that living, practical involvement in reality is not a recipe for subjective beclouding of our understanding but is rather the prerequisite for true insight in conceptualization.

As the remarkable work of Pierre Hadot has shown, this was the assumed perspective of the ancient world. Wisdom itself was understood to be embodied in a certain manner of living according to particular practices and exercises. Ancient philosophical teachings, as we now think of them – highly theoretical doctrines about reality – were, in fact, second-order derivations. The great philosophers and their schools developed very concrete patterns of life. These practical exercises or forms of being in the world were what characterized the philosophical schools most definitively. What we think of as their 'philosophy' was the attempt of disciples to give an account in theory of the forms of life being practised by lovers of wisdom. These doctrinal and theoretical works were essentially teaching tools, designed to give the philosophical schools' students something with which to habituate their minds to the patterns of living that a given school enacted. Hadot summarizes:

> Theory is never considered an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice. Epicurus is explicit on this point: the goal of the science of nature is to obtain the soul's serenity. Or else, as among the Aristotelians, one is more attached to theoretical activity considered as a way of life that brings an almost divine pleasure and happiness than to the theories themselves. . . . Or, as among the Platonists, abstract theory is not considered to be true knowledge: as Porphyry says, 'Beatific contemplation does not consist of the accumulation of arguments or a storehouse of learned knowledge, but in us theory must become nature and life itself.'[18]

In this scheme of things, transforming practices of life give rise to a theoretical account of reality as it is understood by those practitioners. This account, in turn, is intended not as a higher ascent towards reality by means of theoriza-

tion, but as a preliminary guide for those seeking to follow the transforming way of life themselves.

Granted that the transforming practices of life envisaged by feminist and liberation theology are rather different from those enjoined by the ancient philosophical schools, there is nonetheless in our contemporary movements a rediscovery of this balance of theory and practice. Feminist thinkers have for a long time now been unmasking the very idea of a purely objective consciousness or the supposed preeminence of pure theory over the 'merely' categorical. Both these modern shibboleths are seen to emerge from very concrete contexts of male-dominated approaches to reason, contexts whose practical shaping of thought – feminists point out – cannot honestly remain unacknowledged. So, for example, feminist scholars have argued that the academic study of spirituality requires a holistic and participative approach that involves the student and scholar in some personal existential contextualization of the material. In response, some members of the academy have raised serious questions about this proposal, hinting that there is a hidden religious agenda involved. Feminist scholars have in response pointed out that the real issue is the lingering myth of an objective consciousness, which actually hinders both practical and theoretical understanding.[49] Feminist theology has provided a new context for theological reflection in which the community's lived experience is granted a voice. These deeply contextualized construals of reality are helping to shape theology as a more supple and inclusive discipline, able to hear the multiple spiritualities of people not as raw data to be abstracted from, but as having theological substance and import in themselves.

Political and liberation theologies have emphasized the need for theology not simply to reflect doctrinally *upon* the situation of the poor in the light of revelation, but to understand revelation as an interpretive framework, a call to obedience and solidarity in which God's voice can be heard in the lives of the poor themselves. It is, in other words, a question of allowing the 'dangerous memory' of the exodus of slaves from their masters, and the radical interruptive suffering of Jesus among the poor and condemned, and the liberative empowerment of the small persecuted community of disciples, all to operate as lenses that can disclose the continuation of God's liberating work among the poor today. This means that, in the perspective of liberation theology, it is normal and even necessary for theology to emerge directly as a public reflection on, and sharing of, the people's spirituality. Gustavo Gutiérrez writes:

> Spiritual experience is the terrain in which theological reflection strikes root. . . . The solidity and energy of theological thought depend precisely on the

> spiritual experience that supports it. This experience takes the form, first and foremost, of a profound encounter with God and God's will. Any discourse of faith starts from, and takes its bearings from, the Christian life of the community. Any reflection that does not help in living according to the Spirit is not a Christian theology. . . . This fact does not weaken the rigorously scientific character of theology; it does, however, properly situate it.[50]

It is worth noting here a feature prominent also in Hadot's description of ancient philosophy; namely that the goal of the theoretical reflection must be not only to articulate people's encounter with reality but also to assist people in 'living according' to that reality.

It has sometimes been the case that academic theology, as we have seen, is suspicious of spirituality as far too subjective, as purely a kind of poetic language of devotion that, were it to have any utility for theology, would require translation first into more abstract language. This assumption is prominently featured in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), often thought of as the founder of modern theology. Indeed, Schleiermacher counts it as a the very goal of scientific theology 'that the figurative expression be either exchanged for a literal one or transformed into such by being explained, and that definite limits be imposed on the corresponding element in the rhetorical expressions'.[51] This assumes that the religious symbols and imagery of spiritual texts are important but 'early' stages in the expression of religious experience and that academic theology needs to free the essential meaning of these expressions from their primitive representations.

What liberation theology suggests in reply is that the spiritual practices, imagery and patterns of thought emerging in the lives of the poor cannot so easily be dispensed with if theology is going to remain an accurate construal of God's revelation in real history. The symbols and imagery of a people's spirituality are not moving but hopelessly unscientific descriptions of religious reality; they are the interpretive framework that allows the religious reality to be experienced and recognized as such. A story, for example, bears a gift of meaning that draws the listener into a new vision of things which could never be conveyed or achieved by purely discursive or propositional expositions of the story's 'meaning'. From this perspective, doctrines are not the scientifically manipulable 'meanings' of person's lives, rather the lives and spirituality of people are the meaning of doctrine. Jon Sobrino notes: 'The basic change in a theology that had been purely doctrinal came from the realization that the whole warp and woof of the theological task must be shot through with hope, and thus with a call for Christian practice.'[52] Already we can see here a very strong call for the reintegration of spirituality and theology. They are seen as

distinct expressions of one and the same encounter with God, each having particular tasks to perform but always informing each other and leading back to each other.

The ancient technical term for teaching that does not merely speak *about* the divine mystery but helps to lead others to a participatory understanding of it themselves is 'mystagogy'. And it seems fairly clear by now that this is in fact what many liberation theologians are advocating. It is a stance that doubtless raises questions for academic theology today: what would be the truth status of theological discourse if it were oriented in such a fashion towards praxis? What would be the impact on theology's standing in the university? It seems to me that these questions already belong to another era. Many theorists, even the kind one finds in universities, would reckon perfectly intelligible a *participatory* model of truth rather than a purely propositional *adequacy* model. Is my discourse only true, in other words, if I can somehow offer propositions that adequately correspond to a given 'object' out there? But what if the reality I desire to speak of is no 'object', indeed does not exist as one of the items of the universe, but is rather the answer to the question why there is a universe at all rather than nothing? Then it would be the case that the most adequate truth-telling would attempt to guide one into participative encounter with that reality, not to offer an impossible series of descriptive propositions about it.

Truthful discourse about God would thus seem to require a particular way of knowing and stating things, namely a knowing that does not point at something (for there is literally no-thing at which to point) but participates in the mystery of the reality it desires to know. For example, I cannot really know a friend by demanding a listing of particular pieces of information about her, but must in some way come to participate by her invitation in her life. So too with the ever deeper divine mystery at the heart of human personal mystery – understanding requires involvement, practice, participation. In a typically clarifying passage, Sobrino observes:

> It is not enough merely to speak of God. Theology must allow God to speak. Theology must move the human being to speak with God. . . . In order to do this, theology must see to it that its doctrine on God, and its doctrine on whatsoever theological content, genuinely facilitate the experience of God. A theologal theology [i.e., speech *of* God not just *about* God] must be a mystagogy – an introduction into the reality of God as God is: transcendent mystery, utterly resistant to manipulation, and yet our Father, near at hand, good, and saving. The doctrine of God must be such that it both respects God's mystery, and introduces its addressee into that mystery. Theology must know how to speak of God while letting God be God. Theology must integrate into a knowledge

> of God the ignorance corresponding to that knowledge. Otherwise it will not be genuine knowledge of God.[33]

Sobrino's insights are well worth pondering. If theology is to do its job, he argues, it must preserve a kind of transparency to the encounter with God in which it is rooted. This is not simply a question of using pious language, as if a devotionally-tinged prose were somehow specially good theology. That is not the idea at all. Because theology is intended to be truthful talk of *God*, it must take account of the peculiar requirements of knowing and speaking of God. As I suggested above, this particularly includes the awareness that God is not an object which we could simply describe in the usual ways; as if God were like all the other items in the universe only bigger and invisible. Rather, to know and speak truly of God requires being drawn to share in God's own self-knowledge (what that might mean we shall consider in the rest of this book). And so theology, if it is to be of much use as theology, needs to maintain an openness to the spirituality whence it springs, and to orient people towards that encounter themselves.[34] In short, it needs to recover its integrity with spirituality.

Another contribution of liberation and feminist theology to our discussion needs to be highlighted. For besides the focus in these forms of theology on the wholeness and contextuality of all theology, and on the integral link theology has with the spirituality of the people, we are also reminded of the importance of relationality. By this I mean not simply that people and ideas and history are all bound up together in real life, but that we exist *at all* and we know *at all* precisely because we are not 'individuals' in some privatized, autonomous sense but because we live by encounter, by relationship.[35] Feminist thinkers have pointed out the perils of suggesting that we are *only* by virtue of our relationships, for many women have been trapped by this very construction of their own beings as dependent on some (male) other. The idea is rather that, in the first place, what makes us really human is that we have this capacity for relationship (to a more complex and volitional degree than the genetic hard wiring of the herd or pack found in other parts of the animal kingdom); and, in the second place, that we can choose to exercise our relationality in ways that bestow life upon ourselves and others.[36] Relationality does not mean fusion with the other but rather mutuality. This capacity to be one-with-another-in-love-and-freedom is what characterizes us most definitively as humans; it is embedded, therefore, in the very structures by which we exist and by which we know.[37]

Sobrino, for example, speaks of spirituality as a fundamental willingness to face what is *real*, rather than the projected fears or wishes of the ego. The real

is never an abstraction, but living truth that calls for response. To avoid this call, to prefer the security of a putatively self-constructed world, is a kind of dishonesty. 'This dishonesty is not simply a noetic error with regard to the truth of things. Rather it consists in doing things an injustice – violating them in their very being, refusing to be honest with them, refusing to deal with them honorably.'[58] From this perspective, spirituality is embedded in the very structure of reality, because everything that exists calls and beckons towards honest relationship; I exist humanly in my truthful encounters with the real. And at the heart of these encounters always lies encounter with the One who is the continual source of reality – both what I think of as my *own* reality and what I am drawn *out of myself* to encounter honestly as the reality of the other.

So we could say that 'I' come to exist and to know by relating to reality in ways that do not attempt to control reality for my own devices. This is an 'act of correct, converted intelligence, intelligence that identifies as its primary interest the objective service of reality, not the service of the thinking subject'.[59] But, as Sobrino puts it, since so much of what is real today 'lies prostrate in the death of subjection', an honest relationship to this call of reality demands not just observation but a bestowal of life, a practice of love towards the reality of the other. In a sense, reality calls this loving response forth from us; or we could say that the reality of the other calls us out from one moment of selfhood into a new form of life. This is what Sobrino calls the 'more' of reality, the momentum of new possibility and of hope 'with which reality trembles'. To face reality honestly is to allow oneself to be drawn into this momentum that carries us into new activity. 'Thus the subject is not only challenged by that reality, but borne along by it as well, and this sweep, this pull, is a gift from reality, a mediation of gratuity.'[60]

Interestingly, this approach to epistemology bears some resemblance to theories of knowing in Christian mystical traditions. Here knowing and loving are often held together, so that the ultimate form of 'knowledge' is not an event in which certain information is imparted to the mind but rather the mind is drawn to a new level of perception by being transformed in love. For these mystical traditions, knowledge or wisdom is never a merely noetic factor but involves a new way of living, a practical or (to use the old term) 'habitual' kind of knowledge that is acquired through one's manner of life and sensed perhaps more intuitively than propositionally.[61]

What is the significance of all this for theology? If knowing reality is an act of this 'converted intelligence' which does not seek to defend itself against reality but allows itself to be drawn out in love and justice towards the other, then theology as a form of knowing and speaking of God must in some manner follow this path itself. Such an analysis would seem, at least, to disclose

something of *theology's inner character as itself a form of spirituality*, and as aptly fitted therefore to articulate the perceptions of spiritual and mystical journeys.

We have considered how the debate over spirituality as an academic discipline highlights some crucial issues in the relationship of spirituality and theology. Especially significant is the possibility that a scholarly focus on the self's own states might elide the theological import of spirituality, ironically preserving the divorce between the two disciplines just when they might be rediscovering a common mission. The perspectives of liberation and feminist theology have pointed towards a more contextual and relational understanding of both spirituality and theology, suggesting a close correlation between their mutual endeavours to know and speak of God. But all this has been begging a rather large question, namely, what in fact I am talking about whenever I refer to this 'encounter' with God. How might we conceive this divine–human interaction so as to make sense not only of spirituality itself, but of the particular relationship of theology and spirituality? Having sorted through a good number of the points at issue in this relationship, it is now time to take a preliminary gaze into the heart of the matter.

## The Divine–Human Encounter: Some Heuristic Thoughts

What I want to propose now is a tentative approach to the question, 'How does the encounter with God, in its most intimate and intense form, actually take place – and what does our conceptual picture of that encounter suggest about the integrity of spirituality and theology?'

As a kind of itinerary for this section, consider the preliminary heuristic definition of mysticism suggested by Bernard McGinn in his magisterial history of Western Christian mysticism, *The Presence of God*: 'the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.'[62] In some recent public lectures, McGinn has continued to refine and revise this statement, moving towards a more actualist language of *divine grounding of consciousness*. The issues here involve a concern that 'presence' language may connote a kind of static divine essence that does not comport well with the mystical awareness of God's freedom and non-objectifiable reality. Divine 'grounding' language, by contrast, would suggest a more transcendental idea, a sense of God being newly appreciated by the mystic as the continual source or ground of all life. As McGinn says, these are questions that can only be refined by continued

historical study. His point at this stage is to invite us away from fixation with various interpretations of 'union' language; the mystics do refer to their intimacy with God using a range of union images, but this is by no means the only framework in which they discuss a far more dynamic and complex phenomenon than the image of 'union' might by itself suggest.

By his heuristic sketch, McGinn wishes to emphasize a number of critical points. First, the mystical is not a peculiar moment that exists in a cultural vacuum; it is rather always an *element* in a given religious tradition. Christian mystics have always seen themselves as practitioners of Christianity, shaped in all their experiences, perceptions and insights by Christian scripture, worship and teaching. This helps to avoid from the start any idea that the mystics somehow exist in a realm quite beyond Christian theology.

Second, this mystical element of Christianity should 'be seen primarily as a *process* or way of life rather than being defined solely in terms of some experience of union with God'.[63] In other words, while it is true that there comes to be a most intense moment of encounter with God, which we might be tempted to think of (not quite correctly) as mysticism proper, this moment is really part of a life-long spiritual journey – all the preparations for, and reflections upon which, comprise mysticism in its fullest sense. It is specially important for our purposes to see that, in McGinn's view, the mystical is not completed in a given moment of intense experience. All the reflection and transformation that such a moment engenders 'for the life of the individual in the belief community is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense'.[64] So the texts of mystical writers are themselves features of the mystical, and their theological insights are direct expressions of the mystical.

McGinn suggests we speak of mystical *consciousness* rather than mystical experience. This raises a helpful point. It would be undesirable, and impossible, to rule out experience as a category. But the term 'mystical experience' unfortunately has tended 'to place emphasis on special altered states – visions, locutions, raptures, and the like – which admittedly have played a large part in mysticism, but which many mystics have insisted do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God.'[65] The problem has been that, as a generic concept, experience tends to place the focus on these extraordinary inner conditions; furthermore the emphasis seems to verge on the purely affective, as though the noetic content inherent in the mystical encounter were entirely a matter of some later thematization. By contrast, consciousness (here McGinn points to the thought of Bernard Lonergan) is a more capacious term suggesting the full process of cognition: experience (or the 'raw data'), questioning, understanding, judgement. Studies of mystical writers have shown that what is often referred to as 'experience' in their texts includes all

four of these stages of cognition that together constitute consciousness.[66]

So to refer to mystical *consciousness* is a way of taking seriously the language and texts of the mystical writers themselves. They are, in other words, giving voice not to a contentless sensation of the inner self but to a transforming perceptivity – a perceptivity that is being drawn into a mind-*fullness* which exceeds what we usually refer to as 'thought'. To think of mystical consciousness as supra-conceptual does not, obviously, imply a *less* than conceptual form of knowing but something that is in itself even greater in clarity, expressivity, truthfulness and coherence than what we normally understand by the term 'concept'. Of course to say that mystical consciousness participates in greater clarity and expressivity than our usual forms of understanding does suggest the possibility that we may *experience* this supra-conceptual knowing as unknowing and darkness. To revert to a favourite mystical analogy, when we suddenly gaze at the sun after being in a dark room our vision is dazzled – not because sunlight is intrinsically dark, but because our eyes are not adjusted to such light. Analogously, then, to note that mystical consciousness is sometimes *experienced* in terms of darkness and unknowing, does not mean that there is an intrinsic incoherence or void of meaning in the One being encountered.

Yet many scholars have suggested that at the highest levels of mystical encounter, the mystic is drawn into a realm that, *in itself*, is pure noetic silence, absent of all 'word' and devoid of all expressivity.[67] But this would seem exactly to confuse the *experience* of mystical consciousness with the nature of the reality encountered. Surely for the Christian mystic, while God may be experienced in absolute silence (a total absence of form or imagery), God's existence in itself is inherently self-expressive. The speaking of the divine Word is eternal and is never silence in itself but the gloriously infinite effulgence of meaning – a divine meaning-*fullness* that shatters the deathly silence of nothingness in creation and the silence of death itself in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. This means that mystical consciousness is the impression in human existence of infinite coherence, expressivity and meaning, namely the trinitarian life of God. Mysticism bears this speech of God, God-talk, theo-logy, within it and is therefore inherently theologically fruitful.

The task of the theologian must not be to turn away from the painful and ecstatic silences or the unlooked-for words of mystical speech, or to confuse them with the very being of God. Instead the theologian can draw correlations and show analogies between the impression made by the infinite trinitarian expressivity in the consciousness of the mystic and the impression that the same expressive activity of speaking and loving, Word and Spirit, has made in the wider history of revelation as witnessed in the Scriptures. These analogies

might, in turn, become the basis for new and deeper perceptions of Christian faith.

But how can this actually happen? How does a theologian come to sense such analogies between mystical consciousness and the biblical and doctrinal traditions of Christianity? The foundational theological insights of the patristic era seem very often to have been the fruit of teachers who combined theological acuity and mystical perceptivity in their own persons. They knew how to draw such mystical-doctrinal analogies because they lived them themselves. Whether the cultural location of theologians today is very conducive to this kind of mystical-doctrinal personal integrity is debatable.[68] Perhaps the rarity of this kind of personal integration is a sad commentary on the exigencies of those divisions of scholarly labour that so characterize the contemporary academic world.

And yet growing interest in the contextualization of thought and increasingly positive views of interdisciplinary study are both hopeful signs; perhaps they may lead to a new awareness of the fundamental complementarity of mystical thought and theological endeavour. Andrew Louth quotes a highly pertinent text on this point from Diadochus of Photike (mid 400s):

> The theologian whose soul is penetrated and enkindled by the very words of God advances, in time, into the regions of serenity (*apatheia*). . . . The contemplative (*gnostikos*), strengthened by powerful experience, is raised above the passions. But the theologian tastes something of the experience of the contemplative, provided he is humble; and the contemplative will little by little know something of the power of speculation, if he keeps the discerning part of the soul free from error. But the two gifts are rarely found to the same degree in the same person, so that each may wonder at the other's abundance, and thus humility may increase in each, together with zeal for righteousness.[69]

In this view, the mystic and the theologian are always being led to a perception of the same mysteries, only from different perspectives. More than this, the very patterns of their respective vocations lead them towards convergence if never quite identity. And how refreshing to think that in recognizing their different callings, the contemplative and the theologian would not only tolerate one another but regard with wonder and humbling admiration something of each other's gifts.

The point of all this is to suggest that the inherent momentum of theology is towards contemplation, and that this is no abdication of academic rigour or the critical function; the most rigorous and critical turn theology takes may flow from the passionate desire to know the living truth. Christians believe that the ultimate truth of reality is God's triunity, the infinite personal activities

of God's knowing and loving who constitute God as Trinity. Therefore, Christianity holds, at the heart of reality lives an eternal bestowal, expressivity and embrace. Christians perceive this trinitarian life as beyond their understanding yet infinitely full of meaning. The impression made in the consciousness of the mystic by that infinite triune generation of meaning cannot, if it is at all truthful to its source, remain silent or contentless but needs to find the words in which the Word can dwell. So too the expression that theologians seek to give to God's own expressivity should encourage them to renew their formulations and revise their understandings in close conference with mystical thought, which springs with theology from the same source. Theologians are not called to render God's Word yet more 'wordy' – surely the goal of theology is not a sententious banalization of mystery; rather theology fulfils its task by explicating not just the words of Scripture and tradition, but ultimately that living *encounter* with the Word in which the Spirit fills the community with the mind of Christ.

## Notes

1 The account is given in Waltraud Herbstrith, OCD, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, trans. Bernard Bonowitz, OCSO 2nd edn (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 180.

2 *Kreuzeswissenschaft*. Translated by Hilda Graef as *The Science of the Cross* (Chicago: Regnery, 1960).

3 Herbstrith, 168–9.

4 See, e.g., Ann W. Astell, 'If modernity ended in Auschwitz, and if postmodernity was born there, then the place to look for the defining traits of a truly postmodern Christian spirituality is also there, in the concentration camps, prisons and battlefields of the second World War and, more precisely, in the lives of the saints who were formed there.' ('Postmodern Christian Spirituality: A *Coincidentia Oppositorum*?' *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol. 4, no.1 [Summer 1996]: 3).

5 See especially Bernard McGinn, 'The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,' *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1993):1–10; and Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), particularly chapter 2, 'What is Spirituality?', 32–56, and for further discussions of definitions see the citations Sheldrake gives in n. 3, p. 53.

6 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 34.

7 Ibid., 35.

8 John D. Zizioulas, 'The Early Christian Community', in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, vol. 16

(New York: Crossroad, 1987), 23–43, here p. 28. My italics.

9 McGinn, 'The Letter and the Spirit', 3.

10 Ibid.

11 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 35.

12 Kees Waaijman, 'Towards a Phenomenological Definition of Spirituality', *Studies in Spirituality* 3/1993: 5–57, here 35.

13 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 50.

14 McGinn, 'The Letter and the Spirit', 6.

15 Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity', chapter in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 208: '"Scientific" theology became more and more divorced from prayer, and so lost the accent and tone with which one should speak of what is holy, while "affective" theology, as it became increasingly empty, often degenerated into unctuous, platitudinous piety.'

16 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke Books, 1972, 197–8. Quoted in Andrew Louth, 'Theology and Spirituality', revised edn (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1978), 4.

17 In Louth, 'Theology and Spirituality', 7.

18 Ibid.

19 Harvey D. Egan, SJ, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 375.

20 Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity', 190.

21 Ibid., 192.

22 Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, 376.

23 Michael J. Buckley, SJ, Presidential Address: 'The Rise of Atheism and the Religious *Epochē* in *The Catholic Theological Society of America* [vol. 47]: *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention, Pittsburgh, June 11–14, 1992*, ed. Paul Crowley, 1992, 77.

24 Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, 376.

25 William M. Thompson, among others, has noted signs of a new openness to spirituality as a theological source and has attempted some efforts in demonstration of the possibilities inherent therein. See his works, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology. On Consulting the Saints, Mystics, and Martyrs in Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) and *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

26 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 118. Quoted in John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 63.

27 Michael J. Buckley, SJ, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 67. See also William Placher commenting on the theology of the period as exemplified in the preaching of John Tillotson (1630–94): 'Thanks to Christianity, we can reason our way to God more easily [than by natural theology alone], and our moral struggles too will be less difficult, but the God Tillotson urges Christians to worship was not in any central sense either the

God self-revealed in Christ or the source of a grace so amazing as to astonish every human ethical understanding, but essentially reason's God, the orderer of things both physical and moral.' (*The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996], 173.)

28 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 37. It is deliciously ironic, of course, that Hume has Philo enlist as his unwitting ally in the campaign against the 'enlightened' Cleanthes none other than the rather dimwitted Demea, whose views Philo refers to with (mock?) admiration as rather *mystical*.

29 Herbert McCabe, OP, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 20.

30 Louth, 'Theology and Spirituality', 4.

31 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1991), 1.

32 Buckley, 'The Rise of Atheism', 83.

33 Cf. K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, eds, *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995) for some essays suggesting the shape of this emerging spirituality.

34 In order of publication, the articles by Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, are: 'Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?', *Horizons* 13/2 (1986): 253–74; 'Spirituality in the Academy', *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 676–97; 'Spirituality as an Academic Discipline: Reflections from Experience', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 10–15. (Because of the similarity of these articles' titles, I shall refer to them below by the author's surname and year of publication.) Another important collection of essays by a range of scholars on the general issues of spirituality as an academic discipline was edited by Bradley C. Hanson, *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*. American Academy of Religion *Studies in Religion* 62 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

35 Schneiders 1989, 678.

36 Schneiders, 1993, 11.

37 Schneiders, 1989, 678.

38 Schneiders, 1993, 11.

39 Schneiders, 1986, 266.

40 Schneiders, 1989, 683.

41 Ibid., 682.

42 Ibid., 684.

43 Schneiders, 1986, 267. The italics are Schneiders's own.

44 Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 65 (first emphasis mine). See also p. 69: 'I discover myself, not in some pre-linguistic inner space of self-presence, but in the network of multifarious social and historical relationships in which I am willy-nilly involved.'

45 Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec*. Nanzen Studies in Religion and Culture (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 18–19.

46 Ibid., 19.

47 Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 259.

48 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 60.

49 Cf. Joann Wolski Conn: 'I suggest that the real issue behind these questions may not be religious commitment versus objectivity, but the myth of objectivity. The goal of fairness or objectivity in academic disciplines used to be measured by the researcher's distance from the subject matter. I suggest that only when a researcher is critically aware of her or his actual commitments and assumptions, and acts to make them assist rather than prevent insight, can the researcher be objective.' ('Towards Spiritual Maturity', chapter in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993], 239.)

50 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 35 7.

51 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 81.

52 Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 48.

53 Ibid., 71 2.

54 Ibid., 75 6: 'If theology does not . . . have recourse to the locus of the realization of the faith of a poor people, it will be a truncated theology. Ever and again it will become abstractivist and elitist, thus depriving itself of an irreplaceable font of theological cognition. . . . A theology isolated from the people of God – or even worse, at odds with that people – and feeding only on its own resources, will betray its irreality, however true its propositions.'

55 Ibid., 13: 'spirituality is not something absolutely autonomous on the part of the subject; it stands in relationship with reality. . . . I think it important to underscore the "relational" character of spirit vis-à-vis the sum total of reality.'

56 Conn, 'Towards Spiritual Maturity', 254 5, points out that women's need for autonomy is not in service to a post-Cartesian model of the self-referential subject but in order to achieve the detachment requisite for free and faithful relationality and mutuality.

57 So suggests Denise Lardner Carmody, 'Feminist Spirituality as Self-Transcend ence', chapter in *Rising from History: U.S. Catholic Theology Looks to the Future*, ed. Robert J. Daly. Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 1984, vol. 30. (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), 139–55.

58 Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 14.

59 Ibid., 15.

60 Ibid., 20.

61 For a helpful survey of the attitudes towards knowledge in the Western mystical traditions see Bernard McGinn, 'Love, Knowledge, and *Unio Mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition', chapter in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 59–86.

62 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii.

63 Idem., *The Growth of Mysticism*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), x–xi.

64 Idem, *Foundations*, xvi.

65 Ibid., xvii–xviii.

66 I am happily indebted to Edward Howells for clarifying this matter for me; see his forthcoming dissertation at the University of Chicago under the direction of Bernard McGinn, 'Mystical Consciousness and the "Mystical Self" in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross'.

67 See, e.g., the collection of essays, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1990).

68 William Johnston comments fairly bleakly: 'One might draw the conclusion that the primary need is for Christian theologians who are also mystics. . . . Yet I will refrain from drawing any conclusions of this nature. The reason is that from the time of Thomas à Kempis better men than I have been attempting to convert the theologians – and they have been conspicuously unsuccessful. The theologians remain unregenerate.' (*The Inner Eye of Love*, [London: HarperCollins, 1990], 195–6).

69 Diadochus of Photike, chapter 72 of the *Century of Gnostic Chapters*. Quoted in Louth, 'Theology and Spirituality', 14.