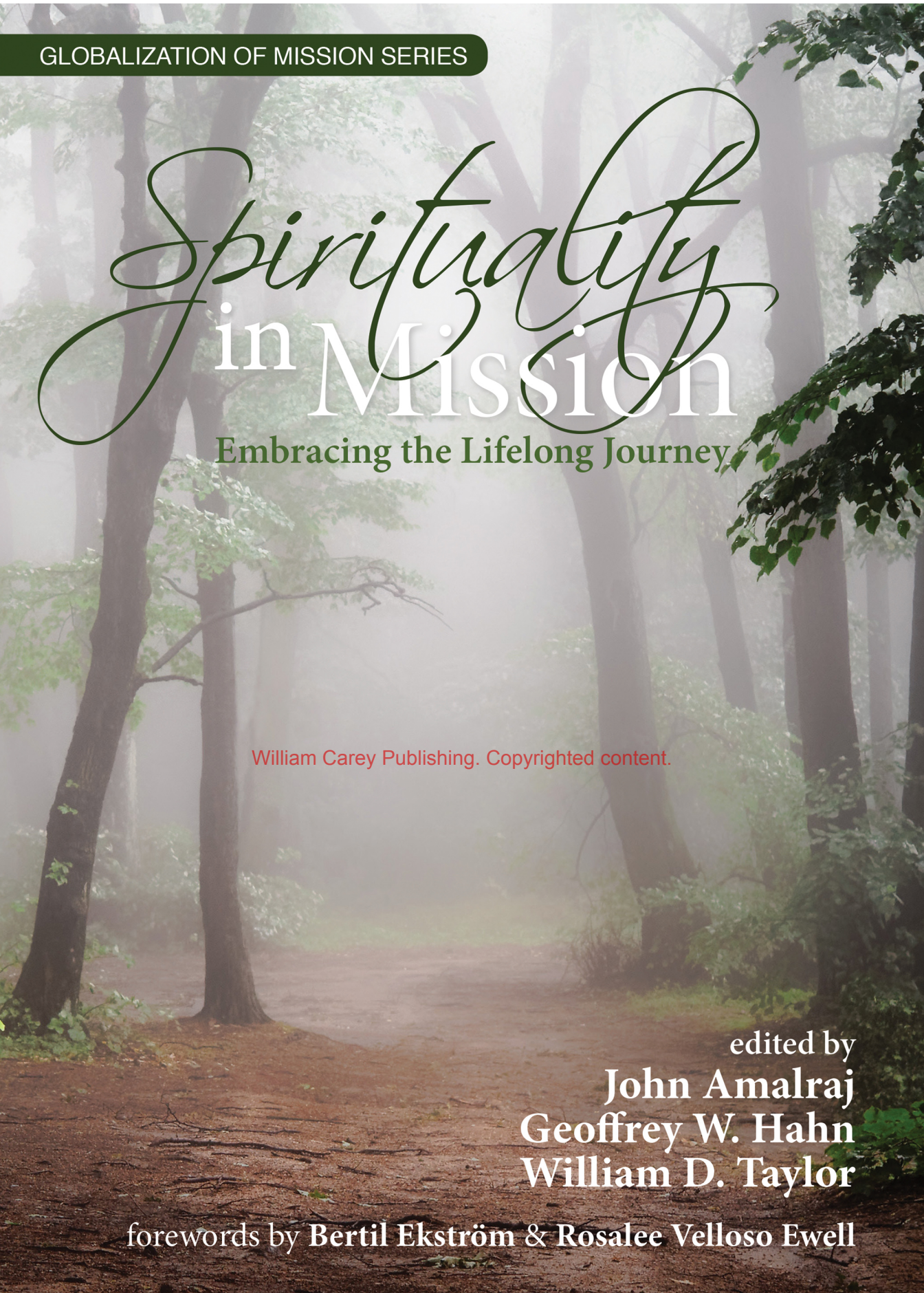

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Embracing the Lifelong Journey
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edited by
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CHAPTER 1

Biblical and Theological Reflections on Christian Spirituality

Rose Dowsett

Introduction

The word "spirituality" does not appear in either the Old or the New Testaments, though the New Testament in particular has a great deal to say about the meaning of "spiritual." On the other hand, both testaments have much to say about "holiness" or "godliness," and about true discipleship impacting every dimension of life. I shall argue that it is these terms that are the true meaning of biblical spirituality, and indeed that until very recently in the course of church history, it is these that Christian believers would have employed.

So, what may have caused this shift in language and terminology? What does it say about both the church and the world?

A Curious Story

In the English-speaking world, the term "spirituality" was originally coined by a group of pantheistic poets and then used by the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century: a profoundly anti-Christian group whose main preoccupation was communicating with the dead through séances. In the twentieth century, the music group the Beatles brought the term into mainstream use during their phase of immersion in Eastern mysticism, yoga, and Hindu and Buddhist meditation. In each case, the concept of spirituality involved a deliberate distancing from Christian belief, indeed a rejection of it.

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in some way, beyond rationality, personal and individual. It can be entirely independent of ethical behavior, can be religious or secular, or simply a synonym for chosen lifestyle.

It was only in the later part of the twentieth century that the term "spirituality" came to be commonly used among Protestant Christians as a description of the particular ways in which different believers expressed and lived out their faith (although the term may have been used a little before this by Roman Catholic and Orthodox writers). It also came to be used retrospectively to describe the distinctive expressions of discipleship of the past—Celtic spirituality, Quaker spirituality, for instance. It frequently involved a strong element of mysticism and focus on the mystery of God as opposed to knowing him through the person of Jesus Christ, and a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

What does matter, however, is that we are clear about what (in this case) Christian spirituality is and the ways in which it differs from the world's usage of the term.

There is no particular problem for us as Christians in using a term with a dubious history. In fact, both the Bible and traditional theology have many examples of absorbing a word or practice and investing them with new meaning and significance. That may be a matter of contextualization or simply recognition of the way in which language evolves. What does matter, however, is that we are clear about what (in this case) Christian spirituality is and the ways in which it differs from the world's usage of the term. Further, what may rather vaguely be thought of as experience of the supernatural does not necessarily equate with genuine experience of the true and living God.

Mystery, Mysticism, and the Holy Spirit

It is beyond dispute that no human being can know all there is to know about God: there is indeed mystery, beyond our ability to grasp. This side of Glory there will always be things we do not understand. He is infinite; we are finite. He is eternal; we are temporal. He is not bound by time and space as we are. He is absolutely just, as we are not. Our minds and understanding are clouded by our fallenness—even though redeemed—and we only "see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13:12). The Apostle John could write, "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18, 1 John 4:12), while also insisting that we can be assured that, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God" (1 John 4:15). The Lord Jesus, in response to a question from Philip, replied, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). It is in looking at, responding to, and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ that we see all that we need to know about the nature and character of God. In him, mystery and revelation are brought together.

It is also the clear testimony of Scripture that the Holy Spirit's ministry is supernatural, often miraculous, and sometimes mysterious (see, for instance, the Pentecost narrative in Acts 1 and 2), but not fuzzily mystical: his activity is always in harmony with the Father and the Son and to forward the Trinity's purposes in relation to creation. A

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mystical experience that does not in some way further those purposes or point to the true and living God is not a Holy Spirit experience. A true experience of the Spirit will lead to focus on God, not self. Sadly, even some so-called Christian spirituality is in fact a form of narcissism: a glorying in an experience, a rush of adrenalin, a seeking after "something uplifting that will make me feel better" rather than an undivided longing for God's glory to shine out to the world.

The Christian church has from its very earliest days had its mystics and its solitaries, especially those who withdraw from the rough and tumble and contamination of "the world" in order to focus completely on God. Christians did not invent these patterns, simply adapting them from already existing ways of life among a variety of religious practitioners, including Jewish Essenes and others. Some took to bizarre ways of life, from those who lived at the top of a high pillar to those who lived in caves or alongside a remote shrine. Some formed silent, enclosed monastic communities whose sole purpose was prayer and communion with God.

The very best of the monastic orders combined much time in prayer and worship with strong commitment to taking the Christian story to the pagan world (most of what we now call Europe, for instance, was evangelized in this way) and to care for the poor and sick. This was not the introversion of mysticism and total preoccupation with "making one's own soul," but the upward and outward focus summarized in the two Great Commandments (Matt 22:37–40). There may be today those who are genuinely called by God to a life that is primarily solitary and wholly devoted to prayer, but this is the exception rather than the rule and should not be regarded as a more spiritual way of life. Both Old and New Testaments are far more concerned with living out faith in God in all the concrete realities of life.

Authentic Spirituality Is All-embracing

The Lord Jesus, following the Old Testament summary of the Law, taught that we are to love God with our total personality—body, mind, soul, emotions, or whatever other categories you care to use, though Hebrew culture did not see these as separable; there was no such thing as a disembodied "spirit," detached from body and mind, character, and behavior. We too often read into Scripture Greek dualism, thus profoundly misunderstanding texts that speak of the soul (e.g., Matt 16:26). Modern Western culture, in the wake of the Enlightenment, emphasizes (entirely falsely) that the spiritual and the rational/material are totally separate, the latter being objective and the former subjective and beyond verification (and therefore unreliable).

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By contrast, both Old and New Testaments bear consistent witness to the call to worship the Lord with all that we are, all that we have, in every dimension of life, and

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that this is the essence of genuine spirituality. Inner experience that does not issue in whole-person transformation is spurious and worthless. Paul, following on from an outburst of worship, citing the glorious nature of God, puts it like this:

> Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)

It is for this reason that the Ten Commandments combine our relationship with God with our relationship with those around us, along with personal behavior. It is also why the Lord Jesus in his ministry heals the sick, feeds the hungry, goes fishing with his friends—alongside teaching and preaching, going to synagogue and Temple, praying and celebrating Passover. It is why he challenges the distortion by the Pharisees of what it means to serve God: the preoccupation with ritual cleanliness while ignoring the hypocrisy and dirtiness of their own hearts (Matt 23:23–26); the despising of a poor widow because she has only two tiny coins to offer to God (Luke 21:1–4); the outrage that a man should carry his mat on the Sabbath, rather than rejoicing that a life-long invalid should, at last, know the liberation of being healed (John 5:1–18); and many more. It is why Jesus says there will be those at the Last Judgment who have been highly religious but who will not be accepted into eternal life because they have ignored the needs of the poor (Matt 25:41–46) and who seem to know nothing of love and compassion and grace towards others. And it is why so much of the Epistles are devoted to the practicalities of living out Christian faith in every dimension. This is what it means to reflect the nature of God to a watching world.

Often in the history of the Christian church, movements have emerged to correct some imbalance or other. In turn they have often themselves then created another imbalance. So the Pietist movement was a needed correction to an outward practice of religion that ignored personal discipleship, the need for personal repentance and conversion, and attention to the study of God's Word, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines. More recently, Liberation Theology, though often based on a faulty Marxist analysis of society, brought much-needed attention to God's concern for justice, his anger at the exploitation of the poor and powerless, and the pressing need to address endemic structural evil.

Authentic spirituality involves the whole person, in the whole of his life, in every dimension.

The truth is that we need the whole word and wisdom of God and not just select parts of it. Authentic spirituality involves the whole person, in the whole of their life, in every dimension.

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Authentic Spirituality Is Profoundly Communal

Too much contemporary Christian literature about spirituality is addressed to individuals in separate self-contained units. But the emphasis of Scripture is on the believing community together being the primary place where faith and character are developed and honed, where the quality of our relationships together is to exemplify kingdom reconciliation, and where children and new disciples, rubbing shoulders with others, are to be brought into ever-growing understanding and concrete lived-out reality of new life in Christ.

The emphasis of Scripture is on the believing community together.

That community may be the home and family, which Luther famously described as "God's little church," it may be the formal congregations where most of us belong, or it may be some other configuration of believing people such as a mission agency or peer group where faith and obedience and transformation are stretched and grown. It is no accident that the majority of the New Testament Epistles, with so much rich theological content and so much applied practical wisdom, are almost all written to groups rather than to individuals, and indeed only make full sense in the context of communal life, set within the even broader context of an unbelieving world. Those letters that are written to individuals have a very easily discerned specific purpose—and even these we read as God's inspired word with significance for us all, not just for the original recipients.

Some Western cultures have become strongly individualistic, and this has rubbed off on many believers. For example, guidance and choice and decision-making may be assumed to be a purely personal affair. Sometimes Christians are urged that they owe it to themselves—and to God—to focus strongly on their personal uniqueness and the fulfillment of their personal giftings; the issue of how these are to serve the body to contribute to a healthier whole may be ignored. The gifts of the Spirit are not in fact given for our own gratification but to help equip the Lord's people together for every work of service (1 Cor 12:1–31; Eph 4:11–16). Similarly, we need one another to help us all in our struggle against sin and in our pursuit of Christlikeness. When we try to do these things on our own, we set ourselves up to fail.

Some cultures are much more communal and interdependent. This makes it more instinctive to expect the living out of Christian faith to be communal, too. It is also why, in those cultures, evangelism needs to be to whole families, or to whole villages or networks, rather than just to individuals. Western mission has not always understood that, and the result has been either that an individual professing faith has been totally alienated from and rejected by his family and community; or that he or she has found it impossible to continue in the faith. The Lord's example in the Gospels is a fascinating mix of dealing with individuals, with households, and with crowds. The contemporary phenomenon of so-called "people movements" is a dramatic illustration of the importance of seeing significant groups of people come to faith together. At the

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