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## Political Spirituality

### Oxymoron or Redundancy?<1>

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#### Introduction

[1] The topic of this essay is political spirituality. To many people this phrase will sound like a stunning oxymoron, a startling contradiction in terms. Political spirituality? Impossible! Politics and spirituality are considered to be at opposite poles in human life. The reason for this is that in contemporary usage in the media and public discourse the word "politics" and its derivatives are used only pejoratively, and the term "spirituality" is used only honorifically, especially in relation to religion. You will see what I mean if our subject were "Politicized Spirituality," or "Politically Correct Spirituality," or "Politically Motivated Spirituality." All oxymorons.

[2] This attitude toward politics is an amazing reversal of the grand tradition of Western philosophical and religious thought which has always held that humans are political beings and has seen the service of the *polis* (and analogously the city of God) as the highest human calling. I must confess, however, (and this will indicate where I am going in this essay) that to me the phrase "political spirituality" sounds oxymoronic in the reverse sense, because I always think of politics honorifically and spirituality in its current usage pejoratively. Briefly my thesis is, first, that the tradition of Christian spirituality and especially its contemporary form generally imply that Christian spirituality has nothing to do with the public life of work and citizenship and especially politics, and, second, that this is a grievous error, and that Christian spirituality, or better the Christian life, has everything to do with politics, and that involvement in the political process is essential in the Christian life.

[3] In the huge burgeoning of writing and activity in the area of Christian spirituality in the last three decades I believe that there are some very serious confusions and misunderstandings. It is commonly assumed that spirituality is an optional matter, that some people are more spiritual than others and some not at all, that spirituality is essentially a good thing (the more spirituality the better), that while spirituality is somehow related to religion it should be sharply distinguished from religion as something superior to and more important than religion, that spirituality is essentially a matter of the inner or interior life (while religion is a matter of the outer life), and that therefore spirituality is essentially concerned with our private life rather than our public life of work and politics. In brief I believe that these common assumptions are erroneous and lead to damaging results in contemporary spirituality, one of which is the assumption that politics is of no concern to Christian spirituality. I should add, of course, that these confusions and misunderstandings are not universal. My point is that at least they are widespread.

[4] As against these assumptions I believe that spirituality is something universally human, that all people are spiritual, that spirituality and religion are practically synonymous, that spirituality is as much concerned with the outer life (of the body, community, institutions, liturgy, tradition, doctrine, ethics, society) as with the inner life, and that spirituality is as much concerned with the public life of citizenship, politics, and work as with private life.

#### Definition and Scope of Spirituality

[5] I suspect that a large part of the problem regarding the definition and scope of spirituality lies in the fact that, according to a study by Walter Principe, the contemporary meaning of the term "spirituality" is relatively new. I am mainly concerned here with the English term, because of its unique narrowness, which I will come to shortly. Although it has been used occasionally in other languages in various senses since the fifth century and in English since the seventeenth century, its contemporary sense has come into common usage only in the last two or three decades. (The 1971 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not list the contemporary meaning.) Because of this relative novelty, it seems to have been assumed that "spirituality" must be distinct from religion or the Christian life, or that it is some special aspect of the Christian life.

[6] I believe, however, that spirituality is most fruitfully defined as the sum of all the uniquely human capacities and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality (in the broadest sense), creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic, and religious capacities, all understood as embodied. As Paul Tillich has put it, "Man's whole life, including his sensual life, is spiritual" (1951-63: 2.51).<2>

[7] This is the formal definition of spirituality. The material definition is the manifold forms in which these capacities and functions have been actualized in human history, namely, the variety of convictions, commitments, associations, and practices by which people have realized, interpreted, ordered, and guided their lives.

[8] The upshot of this definition is that spirituality is universal among humans and not optional. All people are spiritual. Hitler is just as spiritual as Mother Teresa. Spirituality can be good or bad, life-enhancing or life-destructive. Thus spirituality should not be used as an honorific but as a descriptive term. If this sounds odd to the reader, it is probably the result of the unusually narrow meaning of the English term "spirit" which I will address shortly.

[9] This implies that spirituality is a broader and more inclusive term than religion, rather than the other way around. Many philosophers of religion, however, have adopted an analogously broader definition of religion, namely, that of Tillich. He defines religion as "ultimate concern" which he describes as "an abstract translation of the great commandment: '... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (1951-63: 1.11). An ultimate concern is unconditional, total, infinite, and transcends all preliminary concerns. "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being." Furthermore, "every human being exists in the power of an ultimate concern, whether or not he is fully conscious of it, whether or not he admits it to himself or others" (1951-63: 1.14, 24).

[10] This means that all people have a religion, that which functions in their lives in the same way as the traditional religions, namely, interpreting their experience and ordering and guiding their lives. It has been objected that Tillich's definition of religion makes everyone into a religious person. Tillich, however, is perfectly aware that many people are not religious in the traditional sense of being adherents of one of the world religions.

[11] So we could continue to define religion in the traditional way. But that would obscure the fact to which Tillich's definition bears witness, namely, that religion or being religious is an essential dimension of human existence. John Dewey makes a similar point when he asserts that there is a religious attitude, outlook, and function, and that "whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious" (17, 24). Moreover, one of the volumes in the *World Spirituality* series deals with secular spiritualities (Van Ness).

[12] To continue with Tillich's thesis, preliminary concerns can become the "bearers and vehicles" of an ultimate concern. "In and through every preliminary concern the ultimate concern can actualize itself" (1951-63: 1.13). Tillich states that every preliminary concern, every area of culture (linguistic, technical, cognitive, aesthetic, personal, communal) is informed and given meaning by the ultimate concern which is manifest in it. "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion" (1959: 42). If this interpretation of religion is adopted it becomes clear that spirituality and religion are practically synonymous.

## The Semantics of Spirituality

[13] One of the main sources of confusion in writing in English about spirituality is linguistic. In all the Germanic and Romance languages the word "spirit" has the broad meaning suggested above. In English

alone, which is derived from the Germanic and Romance languages via Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and French, the word "spirit" has a much narrower meaning and is limited to religion in the traditional sense and especially to the non-cognitive aspects of religion, namely, those having to do with emotion and will. Tillich states, "The word 'spirit' ... has almost disappeared from the English language as a significant philosophical term, in contrast to German, French and Italian, in which the words, *Geist*, *esprit*, and *spirito* have preserved their philosophical standing" (1951-63: 1.249). And I would add their theological standing.?

[14] Tillich attributes this to the impact of the British empirical tradition which separated the cognitive functions of mind from the functions of emotion and will and identified "spirit" with the latter (1951-63: 1.249f; 3.21-25). The result has been that "spirit" has come to refer to religion in the sense of one of the departments of life and culture and especially to the non-rational aspects of religion. You might call them the Dickensian, aspects of religion (*Geist* becomes "ghost," *esprit* becomes "sprite").

[15] The uniqueness of English usage can be most easily illustrated by its contrast with German usage, since the impact of German philosophy and theology has been dominant in the English speaking world for the past two centuries. Hegel's *Phaenomenologie des Geistes* was translated in all the other Germanic and the Romance languages as "phenomenology of spirit," but in English it had to be translated as "phenomenology of mind." "Spirit" would have been too narrow. Also the German term *Geisteswissenschaften* is usually translated as "human sciences" (but can include the arts and humanities) and refers to psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so forth. But it means literally "sciences of spirit." If you heard that phrase, you might think it referred to the study of religion in the traditional sense and even the study of spiritualism.<3>

[16] These examples illustrate the narrowness of the English term and the linguistic burden and potential confusions under which we English speakers labor. The result is that when we speak of spirituality, we are understood to be speaking of religion as a department of life or a special non-rational dimension of that, rather than to be fully human in the sense of actualizing all the uniquely human capacities and functions ordered by an ultimate concern.

[17] Popular usage today, however, makes a sharp distinction between spirituality and religion, a distinction in which religion is denigrated and spirituality honored. Recent surveys of religious attitudes have often come across the statement, "I'm probably not very religious, but I consider myself a deeply spiritual person" (see, for example, McGuire: 1). In response to an essay in which I suggested that spirituality and religion are practically synonymous, a former student and the founder and director of one of the oldest and largest centers for spiritual formation has written to me that we should "see religion as the container [or] platform for the spiritual life, which in its essence may be qualitatively different from the container, as the heart is from the skeleton" (Tilden Edwards, private communication).

[18] Along with this honorific-pejorative distinction goes the assumption that whereas religion deals with the outer life, that is, institutions, traditions, practices, doctrines and moral codes, spirituality treats of the inner life. These tendencies add more confusion to our understanding of spirituality today.

[19] The last point should be pursued further. In the Christian tradition of writing about spirituality and also today there is a pervasive focus and emphasis on the inner or interior life as distinguished from the outer, bodily, communal, and cultural life. One thinks, for example, of *The Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila and of Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* in which Book 2 is entitled "Suggestions Drawing Us Toward the Inner Life."

[20] More recently Thomas Merton in a circular letter to his friends in 1968 shortly before his death wrote, "Our real journey is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts" (quoted in Shannon: 2). Finally, in a recent study Michael Downey comments on contemporary currents in Christianity spirituality as follows:

The common perception is still that spirituality is primarily concerned with the life of the soul, the inner life, one's prayer life, one's spiritual life, as a separate compartment of the Christian life. The tendency to equate the spiritual life with the interior life is particularly prevalent in our own day (105).

## Spirituality and the Outer Life

[21] I believe that this emphasis on the inner life in contemporary spirituality is fundamentally mistaken - philosophically, theologically, and ethically - and that it needs to be redressed not only to a more balanced

view of the inner-outer relation, but also to an awareness that the outer life is the major source of the inner.<4>

[22] The philosophical critique has been carried out by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Taylor, the theological critique by Fergus Kerr, among others, and the ethical critique by Alasdair MacIntyre and implicitly by some liberation theologians. One of the main achievements of Wittgenstein in his later writings was to reverse the Cartesian view of human beings and to argue that the outer life, namely, the body, actions, customs, practices, community, and tradition, what he called the "facts of living" or the "forms of life," is primary and the foundation of everything we call "inner." Taylor claims that the emphasis on the inner life is not universal but is largely a Western idea which comes from Augustine who drew upon Plotinus. He believes that it is a historically limited mode of self-interpretation which has become dominant in the modern West to the point of aberration (111, 131).

[23] Kerr argues that this emphasis on interiority is derived from the Orphic and Gnostic myth of the soul which has fallen into exile in the body and the natural world and which seeks to free itself and transcend the body and the natural world to achieve purity and true knowledge. He sees modern Christian theology and spirituality as deeply infected by this dualistic religious and philosophical tradition (172f). Finally, MacIntyre sharply criticizes what he calls the "interiorization of the moral life" in medieval and modern Christian ethics. Physical, social, and political circumstances are considered to be essentially irrelevant to morality (168-72).

[24] This critique is supported by a very learned recent study by Philip Cary, in which he states:

I am, in the end, a critic of Augustine's inward turn for two reasons: I think it directs our attention to something that does not exist (the inner self) and away from that in which resides our salvation (the flesh of Christ). . . . What I offer, I hope, is a serious warning for Christians who are attracted to an inward turn (x-xi).

Cary concludes:

Orthodox Christian belief in Jesus Christ undermines the motives of inwardness by making it seem much less inevitable that we must find the divine elsewhere than the external world. There is nothing more external than flesh, yet the Catholic Church since the year after Augustine's death has explicitly taught that in Christ's flesh we find the life-giving power of God. . . . Founded thus on the flesh of Christ, Christian piety has long insisted on a kind of "outward turn" (142).

[25] The inner-outer distinction is a spatial metaphor which is misleading and largely unintelligible. It is misleading because it implies that the inner life is more important than the outer life of the body, the community, and the larger society, which are the main sources of the inner life. It is probably unintelligible, since all the criteria and most of the sources of the inner life are found only in the outer life. A better metaphor developed by Karl Heim can be found in the mathematics of multiple spaces. Then what we call the inner life can be referred to as another space or dimension of human life distinct from those of the space-time world.

[26] Tillich takes a different approach. He does not use the inner-outer distinction but rather affirms what he calls the "self-world structure" or the "subject-object structure of being" which he describes as the "basic ontological structure" and the "basic articulation of being." It is basic, because it is presupposed in the fundamental ontological question, What is being itself? (1951-63: 1.164).

[27] Tillich states the term "self" is more embracing than the term "ego" because "it includes the subconscious and the nonconscious 'basis' of the self-conscious 'ego' as well as self-consciousness" (1951-63: 1.169). Then he asserts that the self has an environment from which it is distinguished and to which it belongs. But the self transcends every environment and therefore has a world, which Tillich defines as "the structural whole which includes and transcends all environments" (1951-63: 1.70).

[28] The elements which constitute the self-world structure, which Tillich describes as the second level of ontological concepts, share the polar character of this basic ontological structure. As mentioned above, they are individualization and participation, dynamics and form, and freedom and destiny. In these polarities the first elements express the self-relatedness of being and the second the character of being part of a world. Furthermore, self and world are completely interdependent; there is no self without a world and no world without a self (1951-63: 1.165, 168-71). I believe that Tillich's concept of the self-world structure is a more fruitful approach to this issue than the inner-outer distinction.

## Spirituality and the Public Life

[29] The emphasis on the inner life in contemporary Christian spirituality is associated with a further distinction. Religion and spirituality are usually understood today to deal primarily with individual life, or at most with family life - with private life as distinguished from public life. This is indicated by the fact that today almost all of the resources of the churches (as well as institutes of spirituality) - that is, personnel, funds, organizations, and so forth - are devoted to the private lives of individuals and the work of residential congregations which focus their attention and ministry primarily on the private family life of their members as distinct from their public life as citizens and workers.<5>

[30] I believe that it is clear from Scripture, however, that the mission of the church is to cooperate in God's mission to the world, the world which God creates, loves, judges, and wills to reconcile to God and lead to its fulfillment in God. Thus the mission of the church is to the whole world and especially to that part of the world which is outside the church. I believe, therefore, that the residential parish is in the worst possible position to carry out this mission because it is almost entirely limited to and focused on the private lives of its members as distinct from their public lives as workers and citizens.

[31] This focus on private life is derived largely from the separation of private and public life during the industrial revolution and the decision of the church, apparently without much reflection, to opt for private life. This was undoubtedly abetted by the emphasis of traditional spirituality on the inner life. The problem here is that private residential life today is at the passive receptive end of society. It is not a particular form of private life which determines the nature of our economic, political, and cultural life, but rather just the opposite. The result is that the tendency of church education, pastoral care, and spiritual formation and direction to focus on issues of private family life is undercutting the mission of the church to public life.

[32] In a recent book James Hillman, the distinguished Jungian analyst and interpreter of Jung, claims that the prevalence of psychotherapy in the last half century has been a major source of the lack of political awareness and participation. It tends to take the strong emotions of rage and fear, which often derive from the public life of a person, and to treat them only as problems of the inner life, as problems of personal growth, thus cutting them off from their relation to public life (see Hillman and Ventura: 5, *passim*). I believe that the same can be said of much pastoral care and spiritual direction today.

[33] A further difficulty is that private residential life is the area of modern life which is most thoroughly segregated by race, ethnic background, social class, and economic status. Thus residential parishes tend to emphasize homogeneity and resist diversity. This makes the addressing of problems of social and economic injustice extremely difficult.

[34] Then there is the problem of clericalism which is exacerbated in the residential parish, because there the functions of the clergy, namely, worship, preaching, sacraments, instruction, and pastoral care, are at the center of attention. Furthermore, the clergy often ask lay people to assist them in their (clerical) ministry. The implicit message is that if you want to take the Christian life seriously and actively, then you should model your life on that of the clergy. This reinforces the emphasis on private and family life to the exclusion of public life. This in turn undercuts the mission of the church to public life, since it is primarily lay people who are in a position to carry this out.

[35] Finally, private residential life is highly structured by gender. In a patriarchal society it is seen as the feminine realm as distinguished from public life which is understood to be the masculine realm. Therefore, any attempt coming from the private sector to influence the public sector will be resisted for strong cultural reasons. For all these reasons, and especially the emphasis on the inner life and the private life, the modern residential parish, to which the churches are devoting most of their resources, is seriously weakened in its mission to the whole of life.

## Spirituality and Gnosticism

[36] I have suggested that these confusions and misunderstandings have damaging results in contemporary Christian spirituality. If spirituality is optional, you can ignore it. If it is a matter of degree, then pride will enter in the form of claiming to be more spiritual than these "religious" people. If it is distinct from and superior to religion, then churches and their traditions, doctrines, ethics, institutions, and practices can be safely ignored. If spirituality is a matter of the inner life, then you do not need to bother yourself with all those boring and tiresome things of the outer life, such as the body, the community, and society. If spirituality is focused on the individual private life, then you can ignore all those

troublesome and non-spiritual issues of public life in politics and economics.<6>

[37] In sum it is clear that these results are closely associated. They constitute a movement of Christian spirituality away from the public world toward the private world and also away from the outer world of the community and society and their institutions toward the interior life of the soul. Needless to say, the individual private life and the inner life are important subjects of Christian attention, interpretation, and ministry. It is the exclusive emphasis on them and their isolation from outer life and public life which is the distortion. For this involves a serious misunderstanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition whose central themes are creation, incarnation, church, history, and the fulfillment of the creation in a transformation including the resurrection of the body.

[38] William Temple, the most distinguished Archbishop of Canterbury of the past millenium, for quibblers at least since Anselm, made this point in his statement that Christianity is

the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions. . . . Its own most central saying is: "The Word was made flesh," where the last term was, no doubt, chosen because of its specifically materialist associations. By the very nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief in the ultimate significance of the historical process, and in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme (1934: 478; see also 1924; 1977).

[39] I believe that the tendencies in contemporary Christian spirituality which I have described are a recrudescence in modern form of the Gnosticism of the early Christian centuries. For example, Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons in the second century and wrote a major treatise against Gnosticism, saw references to the "inner man" as an essential theme of Gnosticism. He stated that "the inner man [of the Gnostics] may ascend on high in an invisible manner, as if their body was left among created things in this world" (*Against the Heresies*, I.21.4-5).

[40] Today this Gnosticism informs many of the New Age and other religious movements which appeared in the sixties as well as some movements from the last century, such as theosophy. This is often referred to as the perennial philosophy, which I believe to be the main alternative to mainline Judaism and Christianity in the United States today, rather than secular humanism, as is often supposed.<7> I believe these movements have been a major influence on contemporary Christian spirituality.

[41] Furthermore, in an odd but very suggestive book Harold Bloom, the literary critic, goes much further and has argued that the real American religion is and always has been in fact this Gnosticism, and the aspects of it to which he points are exactly the ones I have noted in contemporary Christian spirituality. He states:

The American Religion, for its two centuries of existence, seems to me irretrievably Gnostic. It is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: [a freedom] from nature, time, history, community, other selves. . . . [We are] an obsessed society wholly in the grip of a dominant Gnosticism (1992: 49; see also chaps. 1, 2, 16; 1996: 1-34, 219-30).

[42] Moreover, it is important to note that the cultural context in which the recent burgeoning of interest in spirituality has taken place is the current romantic movement which first emerged in the sixties in the youth counter culture movement. Theodore Roszak has argued extensively that the essential foundation of this romantic movement is what he calls "the Old Gnosis." His interpretation of this phrase is rather vague, but one of his key examples is the idealistic monism of William Blake who drew on the "Neoplatonic-Hermetic myth" in the gnostic tradition (1972: 309, *passim*).<8>

[43] Now I believe we can understand why the phrase "political spirituality" would sound so strange to many involved in the current vast spirituality movement. For them spirituality and politics are at opposite extremes; spirituality good, politics bad.

### **The Redundancy of Political Spirituality**

[44] What can we do to overcome these damaging results for Christian spirituality? First of all, we have a major task of reformulating much of the content of Christian formation, namely, baptismal and confirmation instruction and adult education on the Christian faith and life, as well as preaching, liturgy, and education for mission, along the lines I have suggested above.<9> Within this reformulation there

must be, first, a renewed emphasis in Christian formation on the significance of the body and the material, social, economic, political, and historical world rather than an exclusive focus on the soul or interior life. This emphasis is obviously founded on the centrality in Christian faith of the themes of creation, incarnation, history, and consummation, including the resurrection of the body. Although there has been considerable attention devoted to the body in recent Christian spirituality, it has been largely focused on using the body as a foil for the progress of the soul.

[45] Second, the reign of God must become central again in Christian spirituality. The reign of God is the fundamental theme of Jesus' mission: its inbreaking and manifestation in Jesus' presence, healing, and teaching. To be a follower of Jesus means to repent and open oneself to the presence of this reign, to look for and point to signs of the reign, and to participate in it by manifesting its signs in active love of the neighbor and in the struggle for justice and peace. The presence of the reign of God is manifest primarily in outer life and public life, but also in inner life and private life, and it is the former which has been largely ignored in recent Christian formation. This has been abetted, for example, by the tendency to interpret *entos* in Luke 17:21 ("The Kingdom of God is *among* you") as "within" whereas the overwhelming majority of exegetes agree that it means "among" (see the extended discussion by Fitzmeyer: 1160-62).

[46] Tillich made the reign of God fundamental in his theology, devoting the final main part of his *Systematic Theology* to it. This is the part entitled "History and the Kingdom of God" in which the reign of God is interpreted as the answer to the question about the meaning of history (1951-63: 3.297-426).<10>

[47] Such emphasis on the reign of God will require attention to something which is rarely, if ever, included in Christian formation, namely, instruction in our responsibility to and means of access to the political process. By this I mean the whole political process from running for public office, seeking good candidates, campaigning, keeping in touch with elected officials, and if necessary using legal means to redress injustice. (I regularly inquire of directees if they know who their municipal, state, and national representatives and senators are and how they have voted recently on important issues.) If the primary axiom of Christian ethics is love of neighbor, and if our neighbor is anyone whose life we can affect by our actions, including our political actions, then for U. S. citizens our neighbors today include everyone in the world.

[48] Third, there must be a primary emphasis on practice in Christian formation. The priority of practice in the Christian life has a long history. The Johannine Christ teaches that it is they who do the truth who will know the truth. The Matthean Christ teaches that we will be judged on the basis of how we have responded to the need of our neighbors. It has usually been a principle of catholic theology that it is the practice of the Christian life that leads to the understanding of the Christian faith rather than the other way around. George Lindbeck has argued that a religion is like a set of acquired skills, a communal phenomenon which shapes subjectivities. So it is the practices of a religion which shape the inner life rather than the other way around (33f).

[49] The priority of practice suggests that Christian formation should focus on public worship, the building up of the community, the service of those in need, and participation in the struggle for justice and peace. This does not mean that the traditional practices of silence, mental prayer, meditation, and contemplation should be ignored, but only that they should at least be balanced by attention to communal and public practice. In any case if prayer and meditation are authentic, they are practiced in the larger context of public worship and community life, and they lead directly to participation in public life.

[50] If the argument of this essay is valid, then we face a major task of reassessment of much of the theory and practice of Christian spirituality. This will involve a reformulation of the definition and scope of spirituality and its relation to religion, and a reformulation of the relation of inner and outer life and of private and public life with the hopeful result that Christian spirituality will be understood necessarily to involve participation in public life and the political process. Some of this work has already begun, but it has coexisted with widespread confusions and misunderstandings of Christian spirituality. Only a renewed attention to these issues can bring to the theory and practice of Christian spirituality a new coherence. Then the phrase "political spirituality" will not be seen as an oxymoron but as a redundancy, because all Christian spirituality will be understood as political.

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