

Spirituality and Ethics

Helmut Burkhardt

SUMMARY

This article discusses the fact that in parts of the world the study of theology does not (yet) include spirituality, or only recognises spirituality as a separate add-on. The roots of this disjunction of theology and spirituality are found in the Kantian and liberal approaches to theology,

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel diskutiert die Tatsache, dass das Theologiestudium in einigen Teilen der Welt (noch) nicht die Spiritualität beinhaltet oder Spiritualität nur als gesonderte Beigabe anerkennt. Die Wurzeln dieser Trennung zwischen Theologie und Spiritualität sind in den kantianischen und liberalen theologischen Ansätzen zu finden,

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur remarque qu'en bien des endroits du monde, les études de théologie ne comportent pas (encore) de volet consacré à la spiritualité, ou bien celle-ci n'est considérée que comme une option périphérique. Cette dissociation de la théologie et de la spiritualité trouve ses racines dans les approches kantienues et libérales

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1. Definitions

Spirituality is religion put into practice. Christian Spirituality is "the whole Christian enterprise of pursuing, achieving and cultivating communion with God".¹ *Ethics* is the study of how humans have to act and to perform their lives. Next to dogmatics, Christian Ethics as the other part of systematic theology means "determining what types of actions and qualities of character please God".²

2. The situation: a gap between spirituality and ethics

For a long time our culture seemed to be domi-

nated by a process of secularisation; spirituality was not in demand. That has changed and spirituality has become popular, not only as a religious phenomenon, but also as a non-religious, cultural phenomenon.

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which limit the sphere of ethics to human relationships. God is excluded as lawgiver, the biblical commandments play no role and ethics become auto-nomous. Yet the German ethicist Klaus Bockmühl already developed an alternative approach. In it our spirituality (relationship with God) keeps its own place next to our relationship with others.

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de la théologie, qui limitent la portée de l'éthique aux relations entre les humains. Le Dieu législateur en est exclu, les commandements bibliques n'y jouent aucun rôle et l'éthique devient autonome. L'éthicien allemand Klaus Bockmühl a déjà enseigné une autre voie, dans laquelle la spiritualité (la relation avec Dieu) tient une place essentielle à côté de notre relation au prochain.

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nated by a process of secularisation; spirituality was not in demand. That has changed and spirituality has become popular, not only as a religious phenomenon, but also as a non-religious, cultural phenomenon.

Already 25 years ago, in 1984, the fifth conference of FEET, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, signalled such a change. In his opening plenary address D. Tidball said: "Even the most cautious observer would argue that the Western World has undergone a fundamental change in culture since the 1960s... 'I know' or 'I think' has been replaced by 'I feel'".³ In this change we find a characteristic element of what today is called the

turn from modernity to post-modernity.

Yet the scholarly study of theology on the whole seems to be reluctant with regard to this tendency. Spirituality is thought of as a matter of personal experience and emotion, and therefore it does not correspond to the more rational methodology of academic theology. Either theology totally neglects the call for spirituality or specialists on spirituality are granted permission to teach spirituality in addition to the traditional theological disciplines. Especially Roman Catholic institutes for theology have set up chairs on spirituality.⁴ The same is true of Regent College in Vancouver, and even the Humboldt University of Berlin recently established lectures on spirituality. Such initiatives are certainly to be welcomed but one may ask if they are sufficient to overcome efficiently the gap between theology and spirituality.⁵

But before we will find the right therapy, we first have to find out the causes for the disjunction of theology and spirituality.

3. The loss of God as object of ethics

For Luther the trias *oratio, meditatio* and *tentatio* was fundamental for the study of theology.⁶ But already the “father” of German Pietism, Ph.J. Spener in his famous *Pia desideria* (1675) had to lament the deficient spiritual life of the theologians of his time.⁷ In the time of Enlightenment, J.S. Semler allowed the element of existential experience in theology only within morality.⁸ The German philosopher I. Kant with his theory of knowledge definitely established the gap, because for him God is no possible object of human experience and therefore he is also no object for human action. Liberal theologians at the end of the nineteenth century followed the footsteps of Kant. For them loving God, the core of Christian spirituality, has no room for any action apart from loving our neighbour.⁹ W. Hermann, a pupil of Ritschl and a teacher of Barth and Bultmann, affirmed in his *Ethics* that only human beings are ever objects of moral acts.¹⁰ The object of ethics is therefore restricted to the inter-human sphere. This disjunction between ethics and spirituality has become normal at least in the study of theology in the German-speaking world. A significant symptom of this situation is the widespread distinction between ceremonial law and moral law or cult and ethos. Does it mean that *per definitionem* the cult has nothing to do with ethics?¹¹

Today the most recognised German textbooks of ethics are those of M. Honecker¹² and U. Kört-

ner.¹³ Neither of these leaves any room for the discussion of how humanity has to behave towards God. The terminology of the book titles is significantly reductionist: *Grundriss der Sozialethik* (Honecker) and *Evangelische Sozialethik* (Körtner). The word “*Sozialethik*” (Social ethics) only refers to inter-human relationships and within this limitation there is no place for God as an object of ethics.¹⁴

Surely, this does not mean that these ethics are atheistic. On the contrary, in a certain respect God is fundamentally important – but in fact only in the so-called “fundamental ethics”, not in the so-called “*Materialethik*”. Through the justification of the sinner God enables the believer to do what is good. Körtner entitles one chapter (7,5) as “Living through the power of reconciliation”.¹⁵ Already H. Thielicke taught that Christian ethics is “*autonom*” but not “*auto-mobil*”¹⁶ In this maxim he expressly followed Herrmann who said: Everyone must find out for himself what he has to do. The natural inclination of man hinders the realisation of the good. Only by faith can we overcome this barrier, when personal love as the power above all, also above our sin, speaks to us through Christ.¹⁷

In this way spirituality as the Christians’ intercourse with God is reduced to God’s intercourse with us.¹⁸ Meanwhile, our intercourse with God¹⁹ is limited to faith and finds no concrete realisation beyond itself. Our intercourse with God consists of our receiving and enjoying what God is giving us through the gospel²⁰ and in our confident bowing under what is necessary.²¹ Spirituality becomes real only in the area of the moral experience of humanity,²² i.e. in inter-human relationships. In all that a person does he is taken up by moral law, which leads him to his fellow beings: “Faith has to do with God, love has to do with our neighbour.”²³ According to this approach, contemplative love for God and Christ, a personal relationship with a Christ who is personal present,²⁴ is to be rejected as Roman-Catholic mysticism.²⁵

4. The loss of God as Lawgiver

In modern thinking God is not only excluded as an object of ethics, but also as a lawgiver who lets us know what we have to do. This second step is a logical consequence of the first: where there is no knowledge of God, there also cannot be any real knowledge of the will of God. The biblical law may be a revered piece of religious tradition – but no more. So there *cannot* be such knowledge – and

there *may* not be such knowledge, because it would not be moral to act on the basis of alien commandments alone. True ethics is said to be neither heteronomous nor theonomous, but only autonomous.

In Körtner's discussion of the foundation of ethics, for instance, the biblical law has no place. His definition of the task of ethics is: "Normen und Werte, nach denen in einer Gesellschaft üblicherweise über Gut und Böse entschieden wird, einer beständigen Überprüfung zu unterziehen".²⁶ This means that there are certain moral norms and values in every society which, however, don't have any binding authority and no chance to become universally acknowledged. As a mere piece of tradition they have to be under permanent critical examination, if and to what extent they still are valid. Principally there can be no ultimate certainty in moral questions. Ethics lives by transmoral presuppositions (P. Tillich) and only these have ultimate certainty.²⁷ For Körtner the Gospel, i.e. the good news of justification of the sinner by faith, is such a presupposition. He can say that ethics does not live by obedience to a moral law, but by participation in a reality which transcends the sphere of moral commandments.²⁸ This relativism concerning the validity of the biblical law and the animosity against the idea of obedience towards it seems to be typical for modern ethics. Where there is no revelation of God's will and therefore also no obedience to God's will, there the spiritual dimension of ethics vanishes.

5. The loss of specific Christian ethics

General ethics can be defined as ethics which has everyone, all natural human beings, as its subject. Within this discipline God principally can be the object of ethics²⁹ but true Christian spirituality cannot really unfold in this context. This is possible only in specific Christian ethics, i.e. ethics which has the reborn Christian as its subject.³⁰

But normal ethics ("Materialethik") at least since W. Herrmann does not know such specific Christian ethics. According to Herrmann, moral action is founded only in the knowledge of what is obligatory for everyone. Knowledge of the good which could not be proven to be generally human does not reach the idea of the moral good³¹ and therefore a specific theological or specific Christian ethics is impossible.³² This point of view nowadays seems to be generally accepted at least in theology in the German speaking world. There does not exist any concept of ethics which contains special

Christian topics, such as Christian prayer or missions, etc. Ethics is either conceived as situation ethics (with no norms at all) or it merely has norms for everyone.

6. Spirituality and biblical ethics

Biblical religion is ethical religion but this does not mean that religion should be reduced to inter-human relationships. On the contrary, inter-human relationships must be integrated into the perspectives of religion. The relationship of the human with God must be fundamental. The inter-human responsibility follows from the fact that humanity was created in God's image and therefore has unique dignity.

This coordination of religion and humanity is fundamental in Old Testament ethics as we can see in the two parts of the Decalogue. The first part contains the commandments concerning our relationship to God: the first to fourth commandments (Exodus 20:1-11; Deuteronomy 5:6-15). In the New Testament we likewise find the double commandment of love, beginning with the commandment to love God:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment (Matthew 22:37-38); cf. the Shema, the main creed of Israel (Deuteronomy 6:5).³³

The same is true of the Lord's prayer. It begins with the three requests concerning God and his will: "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"; only after these comes the first request concerning our own interests: "Give us our daily bread" (Matthew 6:9-11).

But the Bible tells us that the relationship between God and humankind has been disturbed by sin. Therefore religion ethics (i.e. "Religionsethik", not "religiöse Ethik") cannot be enfolded accurately within general ethics. Natural humans can in a certain way fear God, they can guess and even wish that God may be. But they are not really able to give honour to God, believe in him and love him with all their heart. That is only possible when they come to know God as their redeemer, who "in Christ was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19), i.e. it is possible only within specific Christian ethics. The decisive foundation of all Christian spirituality is the personal spiritual renewal of the individual human being in

conversion and regeneration so that as a result one may “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16).³⁴

Walking by the Spirit means: Living in the power of the Spirit of God and with the kingdom of God as the ultimate horizon of our life (Matthew 6:33). Living in the power of the Spirit means “Living by the Gospel”.³⁵ It also means daily communion with God in prayer and in daily “Listening to the God who speaks”,³⁶ and by this learning what God wants me to do (guidance through the Spirit) and than do what God says.

All this happens in our personal communion with God. But our spiritual renewal at the same time also leads us to communion with other Christians. Walking by the Spirit also means living in communion with our fellow-believers, i.e. in the Church. The worship in the services of the Church is a prominent place to experience and live spirituality.

Moreover, personal communion with God in Christ through the Spirit, and communion with other believing Christians are sources of an ongoing spirituality which leads us to selfless engagement in missions and in charity. In this context communities can develop which support the coming kingdom of God in a special way. Biblical indications in this direction we find especially in Matthew 19:12 (celibacy) and 19:21 (no personal property; cf. Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-35). In monasticism and in similar forms of life within Protestant churches these suggestions are taken seriously.³⁷

7. Overcoming the gap between spirituality and ethics: doctrine of spirituality as essential part of ethics

Spirituality and the sphere of inter-human responsibility may not be divided. The first has to prove itself in the realm of the second. This has been rightly stressed in liberal theology (see W. Herrmann and others) and has at all times been a characteristic of true Christian spirituality.³⁸

But both may not be identified either. Spirituality as direct communion with God has its own right in addition to the communion with our fellow men. The presence of the Spirit in the life of the believers also opens new horizons for ethical action to serve God and make evident his reality in this world. Therefore spirituality can and should be a vital dimension of all doing theology. Moreover, teaching on spirituality can and should also be an integral part of the canon of topics in the study of ethics: religion ethics within general ethics, and

spirituality of prayer, of community, of missions and of charity within special Christian ethics. That would be an essential contribution towards overcoming the gap between spirituality and ethics.

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Notes

- 1 H. Rack, *Twentieth Century Spirituality*, London 1969; cited by J. I. Packer, ‘Evangelical Foundations for Spirituality’, in M. Bockmuehl & H. Burkhardt (eds.), *Gott lieben und seine Gebote halten (Loving God and Keeping His Commandments)*. In memoriam Klaus Bockmühl, Giessen 1991, 149-162, 149.
- 2 Packer, ‘Evangelical Foundations’, 149.
- 3 D. J. Tidball, ‘Christian Theology in a World crying for Experience’, in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *Christian Experience in Theology and Life*, Edinburgh 1988, 1-15, 1.
- 4 Cf. G. Ruhbach, *Theologie und Spiritualität*, Göttingen 1987, 19.
- 5 Ruhbach, *Theologie und Spiritualität*, 19.
- 6 See the preliminary notes to the first Wittenberg edition from 1539 = WA 50,658; cf. P. Zimmerling, ‘Plädoyer für eine neue Einheit von Theologie und Spiritualität’, in *Pastoraltheologie* 97 (2008) 130-143, 132.
- 7 Ph.J. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, deutsch /lateinische Studienausgabe, Giessen 2005, 28ff.
- 8 Cf. Zimmerling, ‘Plädoyer’, 133.
- 9 A. Ritschl, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, 1875, reprint Gütersloh 1966, § 6a, 16: “Die Liebe zu Gott hat keinen Spielraum des Handelns außerhalb der Liebe gegen die Brüder”; on Ritschl see Ki-Seong Lee, *Die menschliche Liebe zu Gott als Thema der evangelischen Theologie*, Aachen 2002, 201-271; cf. also J. M. Houston, ‘Reflections on Mysticism’, in Bockmuehl & Burkhardt, *Gott lieben und seine Gebote halten*, 164.
- 10 W. Hermann, *Ethik*, Tübingen 1921, 232: “Das Objekt sittlichen Handelns sind ausschließlich immer die Menschen.”
- 11 Cf. the critical remarks on this distinction in H. Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law?*, Carlisle 2004, 45-46.
- 12 M. Honecker, *Grundriss der Sozialethik*, Berlin 1995.
- 13 U. H. J. Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, Göttingen 1999.
- 14 Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, 43 criticizes the affirmation of E. Herms from Tübingen, “dass

- Ethik in concreto immer Sozialethik ist" (that ethics is always social ethics). In fact, in the glossary at the end of his book he distinguishes between personal ethics, social ethics and environmental ethics (331) – but again there is no place for religious ethics.
- 15 Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, 131: "Leben aus der Kraft der Versöhnung".
 - 16 H. Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik I*, Tübingen 1956, 21.
 - 17 If "die persönliche Liebe als die Macht über alles, auch über unsere Sünde, durch Christus zu uns spricht", Herrmann, *Ethik*, 139.
 - 18 Cf. W. Herrmann, *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott*, Stuttgart 1892, chapter 2, "Der Verkehr Gottes mit uns".
 - 19 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, chapter 3, "Unser Verkehr mit Gott".
 - 20 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, 242.
 - 21 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, 255.
 - 22 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, 165.
 - 23 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, 173: "Der Glaube allein geht auf Gott, die Liebe auf den Nächsten".
 - 24 Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, 231: "mit dem ihnen persönlich gegenwärtigen Christus ein persönliches Verhältnis haben".
 - 25 Cf. Herrmann, *Verkehr mit Gott*, chapter 1, "Der Gegensatz der christlichen Religion zur Mystik".
 - 26 "To subject norms and values, which normally decide about right and wrong in a society, to continuous scrutiny". Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, 33.
 - 27 Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, 100.
 - 28 Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik*, 99: Ethics lives "nicht aus Gehorsam gegenüber einem moralischen Gesetz... sondern auf Grund der Partizipation an einer Wirklichkeit, die den Bereich moralischer Gebote transzendiert".
 - 29 Cf. H. Burkhardt, *Das gute Handeln. Ethik II, I*, Giessen 2003, 84-91: "Die Geltung religions-ethischer Normen im Rahmen allgemeiner Ethik".
 - 30 Cf. K. Bockmühl, *Gesetz und Geist. Eine kritische Würdigung des Erbes protestantischer Ethik*, Giessen 1987, 85ff.
 - 31 Herrmann, *Ethik*, 2: "Eine vermeintliche Erkenntnis des Guten, die sich nicht als allgemein menschlich ausweisen könnte, würde den Gedanken des Guten noch gar nicht erreicht haben, mit dem es die Ethik zu tun hat."
 - 32 Herrmann, *Ethik*, 1.
 - 33 Cf. W. Lütgert, *Die Liebe im Neuen Testament*, Leipzig 1905, 41-71; K. Bockmühl, *Das grösste Gebot*, Giessen 1980 (= Bockmühl, 'Leben nach dem Willen Gottes. Schriften zur Materialethik', BWA II,3, Giessen 2006, 210-248).
 - 34 Packer, 'Evangelical Foundations', 152-153: "the motivational theocentricity of the heart set free... is the foundation... of true spirituality"; cf. H. Burkhardt, *The Biblical Doctrine of Regeneration*, Leicester 1978; *idem*, 'Regeneration', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester 1988, 574; *idem*, 'The Experience of Conversion', in Marshall, *Christian Experience*, 139-158.
 - 35 K. Bockmühl, *Living by the Gospel*, Colorado Springs 1986; *Deutsch Leben mit dem Gott, der redet*, BWA I,6, Giessen 1998, 1-75.
 - 36 K. Bockmühl, *Listening to the God who speaks*, Colorado Springs 1990; *Deutsch Leben mit dem Gott der redet*, 77-180.
 - 37 K. Bockmühl discusses the loss of the so-called *opera supererogationis* and of special Christian forms of community life since the time of the Reformation in his magisterial study: *Gesetz und Geist. Eine kritische Würdigung des Erbes protestantischer Ethik*, Giessen 1987, 140ff; 150ff; 171ff; 248ff; 340ff (2nd edition in: BWA I,5, Giessen 2008).
 - 38 Cf. Houston, 'Reflections on Mysticism', 174: "To experience God directly in one's Life... is to be transformed by God."

God, Order and Chaos

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Stephen Finamore

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