

HUMAN BEINGS ARE SPIRITUAL

O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.

(St Augustine (354-430), Confessions I i)

God created humans as spiritual beings, beings who are able to relate to God and to respond to God's revelation of himself. Humans seem to have an instinctive awareness of the existence of a supreme being. They have a 'natural knowledge' of God. This is sometimes referred to as a 'God-shaped hole' which every human being seems to have and which can only be filled by God (Acts 17:27-28; Rom 1:19-20). This spiritual dimension distinguishes human beings from the animals and the rest of creation (cf 'animism' which sees all creation as possessing 'spirit').

Human beings have a need to experience awe, mystery, and a sense of the transcendent. They look for ways to experience and express these emotions and feelings. The question is not whether a person has a spirituality, but rather what kind of spirituality they reflect and express.

Other factors also contribute to human spirituality. Creation suggests the existence of a creator. God's operation in nature and human history point to his existence. So also does human conscience, the awareness of right and wrong. The existence of various religions shows that human beings have a natural religious tendency and that they want to live in harmonious relationship with a supreme being, whatever their understanding of the deity may be.

Christians acknowledge that 'natural' religion is the human reaction to God's revelation of his power and wisdom. However, they also believe that only in Jesus Christ do human beings come to know God and live in harmonious relationship with him as a loving and merciful Father (John 14:6).

Expressions of spirituality

There has been an increasing interest in spirituality during the past decade. Very often this is not associated with any specific Christian denomination nor with any formal religious context or practice. The remark is often heard: "I am 'spiritual', but I am not 'religious'". As trust in modernism with its positivist paradigm has faded and the postmodernist critique of former meta-narratives of the western world has placed

increasing emphasis on ways of knowing beyond the scientific and objective, so an increased interest in spirituality has developed.

Interest in spirituality

Some examples of this interest in 'spirituality' include:

- valuing mystical experiences or moments of awe and wonder
- sensing 'the sacred'
- searching for meaning, identity and purpose (hope) in human existence
- emphasising relationships, trustworthiness and connectedness
- seeking for a sense of well being and happiness
- sensing the interconnectedness of the world as part of the universe
- attraction to eastern religions through their emphasis on meditation
- exploring stillness and silence
- reacting to materialism and secularism
- exploring indigenous spirituality
- fascination with the occult, satanism, witches, etc
- addressing the affective dimension in religious education
- exploring communication through art, music, dance, drama, etc
- investigating the mysterious and the miraculous

Approaches to spirituality

Individuals may express their spirituality in very different ways based on different presuppositions and approaches to life. Their attitudes and values are reflected in the way in which they live and how they relate to other people. Their spirituality will be influenced also by the cultural context and society in which they live. Examples include the following:

- humanistic spirituality which sees human beings as the centre of the universe and human reason providing sufficient answers to the questions of life
- secular or materialistic spirituality which maintains that there is nothing beyond our material existence
- social or cultural activities which provide some level of meaning for an individual – eg sport, media, 'reality TV', sex, etc
- altruistic spirituality which actively pursues the welfare of others and is an inspiration for others
- selfish, hedonistic spirituality which is concerned only with gratifying one's own desires and wishes
- evil, demonic spirituality
- mysticism which leads to the attempt to feel at one with god through direct contact with god: lifting oneself into the presence of god through self-denial, asceticism, meditation, etc

- meditation leading to complete 'emptiness' – eg Buddhism
- meditation which tries to connect 'god within us' with 'god outside of us' – eg Hinduism
- New Age spirituality which tries to create one's own reality

Members of the school community, both students and staff, need the opportunity to explore and express their own forms of spirituality. The school can provide a safe environment in which such formation can take place and in which different approaches can be evaluated. Critical will be a sensitive presentation of insights into Christian spirituality while respecting other approaches to spirituality.

Indigenous spirituality

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of an understanding of indigenous spirituality in Australia for all Australian citizens. Aboriginal spirituality needs to be appreciated in its own right as a response to human spirituality. It can also be explored for points of contact with Christian spirituality. Local resources may be available in the school and some general introductory references are listed below.

Christian spirituality

The response to God's action

Christian spirituality does not begin with human action. It is not a process of individuals trying to experience God or attempting to open up a way to God (cf tower of Babel: Gen 11:1-9). Christian spirituality is not trying to ascend to God, but recognising that God descends to us. Christian spirituality is therefore the response of the believer to what God has already done and it leads the Christian into a life of discipleship and practical Christian living. Christian spirituality is the life of sanctification lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Based on the work of Jesus Christ

Christian spirituality is based on God's action in Jesus Christ. Through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself as a God of love and forgiveness and has opened up the way to himself (cf **CB2**). This is the action of God's totally undeserved grace which restores the Christian into a right relationship with God once again. This is the only foundation for Christian spirituality and creates the freedom to live in response to God. Christian spirituality means *to be in Christ* and *to live in Christ*. It embraces both *being* and *doing*; who Christians are and how that determines how they live.

Centred on the word of God

God has revealed himself and his gift of salvation to us in his word (cf **CC1**). This means that God's word is central for Christian spirituality. It is God's

word which reveals Christ to us and implants Christ in us. God's word is the power (Rom 1:16-17) which makes Christian spirituality possible. For this reason, remaining in contact with that word is crucial for a life of Christian spirituality.

The link between reading the word, meditation and prayer is important here (for prayer cf **CC3**). A very helpful treatment of this is Luther's 'A simple way to pray' (cf Schubert's paraphrase). An understanding of the particular nature of Christian meditation in contrast to other forms of meditation will also require consideration here (cf article by Kleinig). Christian meditation has its focus on God and his word rather than on any potential within the individual. The person stands under the word of God and listens to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through that word with the outcome of a joyful response to God in confession, prayer and praise rather than finding one's 'true self' or solving one's personal problems. Martin Luther spoke of a three-fold approach to meditation. First comes prayer for the Holy Spirit to speak through the word of God and inspire our thoughts. Secondly comes meditation, which Luther practiced by reading and repeating the word aloud so that the word moves from the tongue to the ear and to the heart (not from the eye to the brain!). Thirdly, Luther identified the process of testing as the word has its impact on one's life and the difficulties and suffering (also from the temptation of the devil) which lead the Christian back to Christ and the gospel.

Crucial for the Christian disciple is worship (cf **CC3**). In worship God speaks his word of law and gospel; the gospel is enacted in the sacraments, the Holy Spirit is at work through the word and the community of the faithful is created and renewed. Christian spirituality is always focussed on the word.

Being shaped by the Holy Spirit

Christian spirituality in the life of the individual leads to God shaping or forming the person. St Paul (Rom 12:2) speaks about Christians being 'transformed' by God (the passive voice in the Bible indicates God's activity). Spiritual formation means that Christ is formed in Christians (Gal 4:19) as they come to fullness of life in Christ (Col 2:10), grow 'to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Eph 4:13), and gain 'the mind' of Christ (Phil 2:5).

Christian spirituality leads to a life of faith and obedience in which all of life is lived in dependence on the grace of God and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It relates to the inner life of the Christian (growth in Bible reading, Christian meditation, prayer, etc) but it must not become simply introspective. It is intensely personal, but must not become focussed on self.

A healthy Christian spirituality is concerned with life in the faith community and in the world in general. It is relational and communal and expresses itself in service to others and not in retreat from the world. Christian spirituality is theology of the cross in action (cf **CL2** and **CL3**). It operates through the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given to each Christian individual through which they carry out God's work in the world as faithful stewards (Luke 17:7-10).

Some traditions of Christian spirituality

Through the centuries, a number of different traditions have developed in the practice of Christian spirituality. Different approaches appeal to different individuals, but it is important that no one tradition is emphasised to the detriment of the others. Individuals need to be helped to develop expressions of spirituality which are relevant for themselves and their circumstances.

1. contemplative tradition
2. stresses the importance of silence, of discipline, of resting in God rather than performing (eg the monastic movement)
3. holiness tradition
4. emphasises the importance of living a holy life, often also withdrawing from 'the world' and taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (eg monastic communities, Lutheran pietism)
5. charismatic tradition
6. focuses on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and on living an active, healthy Christian life (eg Pentecostal movement)
7. social justice tradition
8. stresses the importance of being involved in the world of human society and creation: bringing God's justice to bear on the evils of a world suffering the results of human sin (eg the Salvation Army)
9. evangelical tradition
10. stresses saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour and the centrality of the Bible as the source of final knowledge about God and salvation: it responds to the call to witness to the gospel in the whole world (eg the great missionary movements)

A Lutheran approach to spirituality identifies with all of these traditions, but particularly with the evangelical tradition. It is grounded in the gospel and in the freedom which comes in Jesus Christ. It is focussed on hearing the word of God as both law and gospel and living constantly in dependence on the grace of God. While a Lutheran approach to spirituality emphasises the importance of personal practices of Bible reading, meditation and prayer, it also recognises the centrality of communal worship and the blessings of word and sacrament in that worship. While it appreciates the value of stillness and silence, it does not retreat from the world, but seeks to express itself in service of others, using the gifts

God gives through the working of the Holy Spirit. All this is God's work in and through the individual.

Christian Studies Framework Christianity in the world

Key Idea 2: People express their spirituality in various contexts within and beyond Christianity.

Explore the mystery!

Share aspects of this mystery that stir your imagination.

Where have you discerned or experienced the Spirit at work in unexpected contexts, especially school contexts?