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# CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY: AN “ENCOMPASSING FIELD”

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Christian spirituality, understood as both an experiential, lived-life phenomenon and an academic discipline gives a new-found universal perspective to the reflective Christian. It constitutes an encompassing, incorporative “field” through occupying a “give-and-take” inter-disciplinary place in a general academy of Spirituality and through repossession of its own traditions, insights and ecumenical spiritual landscape. These discoveries are further enhanced through contemporary Christian spirituality’s own critical appreciation of globalisation and postmodernism. Contemporary Christian spirituality, at its best, constitutes a world-appreciative openness that nevertheless sustains its own unique identity. In short, contemporary Christian spirituality offers a lived-faith and academic discipline that is globally conscious and universally aligned. It operates out of a credible contextual rationale for our times.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Schneiders (1989:692), renowned pioneer of academic Spirituality, employs a designation of Harvey’s (1966:54-59), albeit in another context, when she describes the discipline of Christian Spirituality as “a field-encompassing field.” Contemporary Christian spirituality *as a whole*, however, might aptly be described as “a field-encompassing field.” Christian spirituality, when reflectively delineated, yields an encompassing (and often global) perspective for reflective Christians. Further, whether one speaks of Christian spirituality in the sense of “lived experience” or as a “contemporary academic discipline,” the same “encompassment” or embrace prevails in both manifestations. A few attributes or aspects of contemporary (and in the main *Christian*) spirituality will now be delineated and an indication will be offered as to how “encompassment” or a welcome inclusiveness is evident in each case or attribution. The attributes of “lived experience” and “academic discipline,” already referred to, constitute a substantial and significant portion of contemporary spirituality’s overall nature and description. They each form part, therefore, of the delineation that follows. Naturally the following aspects

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of contemporary Christian spirituality are less than self-subsistent compartments or discrete entities. Still, the distinctions are helpful and important.

## 2. “LIVED-LIFE” SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality in its fundamental “grass roots” expression relates to lived-life and to everyday, “ordinary” people and their experience. It begins and is nurtured in the lives and experiences of every-day men and women. Hudson (1995:15) defines spirituality as “... being intentional about the development of those convictions, attitudes and actions through which the Christ-following life is shaped and given personal expression within our everyday lives.”

A much-quoted all-purpose definition of spirituality says that “[S]pirituality refers to the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (Schneiders 1986:266).

Spirituality, therefore, hardly begins in the cerebral chambers of the academy. The word is on countless lips today. Many people witness to the benefits of spirituality. More than a few exponents, while so doing, express disaffection with organised religion. The proliferation of popular spirituality practitioners, books, talk-shows, spiritual music (or even apparel that supposedly exudes spirituality) is phenomenal. Neither can it be denied that real change, enlightenment or spiritual maturation is frequently evident. Certainly “spirituality” is a word, experience or discipline whose time has come. The word itself is sometimes used with circumspection. More often, however, there is conspicuous ignorance — not least amongst Christians — of spirituality’s loaded etymology, arbitrary deployment or mindless denigration. Ironically enough, a public-podium mention of spirituality should not be surprised at wistful audience murmurs — even applause.

In terms of “lived life,” or “experience,” it is immediately evident that the spirituality-phenomenon transcends religious, cultural and national boundaries. In that respect it might be plausibly expected to give every-day Christian spirituality a wider (multi-religious) perspective. Whether it does in fact do so will have to wait for empirical investigation. Far less in doubt, though, is the way that spirituality has become the general (ecumenical) Christian designation for Christian “lived life.” The word, or phenomenon, has largely replaced the limited, parochially-distinctive

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1 Any number of popular books could be cited as examples of Protestant-friendly literature on the “Quiet Time,” and other Protestant pursuits. But even more contemporary works, such as those of Foster (1978, 1992) and Willard (1988, 1993, 1998) are suggestive of the same adaptation to Protestant tastes and tenets. Such adaptation is still evident where a Catholic or Orthodox contribution is acknowledged or appreciated, as in Foster & Smith (1990). Reference to the sacraments, however, is absent in Foster (1978, 1992) except in the most generalised way. Foster is a Quaker.

words of recent years. “Piety,” “devotions,” “prayer life,” “Quiet time,” “time spent with *the Word*,” and (more comprehensively) “Christian disciplines,” have been the familiar Protestant designations for its own kind of spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Catholics, however, have adhered to the classic distinction of ascetic and mystical theology and a presumed inaccessibility of the “rank and file” to the mystical life, at least in the Pre-conciliar period. Furthermore, ascetical understanding and appreciation in the Catholic tradition might be supposed to have had a far more sophisticated, deliberative and historically documented background than its Protestant counterpart.

The purpose in pointing out such traditional distinctions is to show how experiential, contemporary spirituality has acquired a wider meaning and perspective than the adumbrated, limited designations of both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, at least before the emergence of contemporary spirituality. Christian spirituality as “lived life” expresses or assumes an inclusivity and versatility of action and experience that the traditional categories did not. Factors promoting the inception of contemporary spirituality are surely complex. Nonetheless, no small part of spirituality’s wholeness and width of possibility can be attributed to the conciliatory spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); particularly the Council’s impact on spiritually hierarchical constructs. Ascetical theology had formerly been understood as accessible to all Christians. Mystical theology, however, was thought to be the province of the few — that is, of specially gifted mystics. One might say with some conviction, however, that spirituality is really the child of the formerly hierarchical “ascetical” and “mystical” theology. The merging of the ascetical and mystical characteristics conceived an encompassing and inclusive word for Christian experience, “spirituality”, which answered to the Catholic call for universal holiness. Schneiders (1989:687) has adeptly shown how “spirituality”, since Vatican II, increasingly became the preferred word to the older “spiritual theology.” The latter was embedded in prescriptive constructs of ascetical and mystical theology.

What do the deliberations of Councils, or the categorisation and economies of professional theology, have to do with “lived-life spirituality”? Clearly the conciliatory spirit of Vatican II broadened the perspective of “grass roots” Christians. The impact was not exclusive to Catholicism either. Furthermore, the general sense of “spirituality” began to take hold as an experience of life. Something more is now implied by “spirituality,” for example, than what has gone before. Spirituality as lived experience brings more to life than a specifically ascetical understanding of Christian growth, or the private discipline of the “Quiet time,” or Christian disciplines, or specifically “evangelical” understandings of spiritual maturation. Exponents of spirituality may be so incorporative as to speak of the use of music, diet, ambience, meditation and various fragrances to enhance a spirituality that is decidedly holistic. But more importantly, and generative of the above, there is a new contemplative dimension that is not simply synonymous with “prayers” conventionally understood.

Schneiders (1986:254), the architect and front-runner of so much contemporary structuring and theorising on spirituality, indicates that while spirituality began among practising Christians, its connotations became much wider. Schneiders says that at first it had primarily to do with prayer. Soon it was understood as relating to an intensified faith life as well. In its development others took it to mean the whole of personal experience. It also came to incorporate the implications of Christian commitment to social and political life:

It is important for our purposes, however, to be aware that all four of these connotations are operative when the term spirituality is used today and it is not always clear which is in the forefront, nor are all in agreement that the term is used in each and all of these ways (Schneiders 1986:254).

Suffice it to say, then, that spirituality as “lived life” evidences and entertains a broad and inclusive perspective — certainly more inclusive than aspects of Christian expression and growth that are now often encompassed within it. Spirituality as lived life is moreover a break away from a more sectarian “life in the Spirit” perspective and expresses catholicity far better than previous spiritual theologies, whether formal or strongly presupposed in lived life practice (Collins 2000:37). “Life in the Spirit” programmes, usually a Protestant or “Charismatic” enterprise, admittedly claimed a “lived life” spirituality *in* the world. Nonetheless, these programmes were arguably a withdrawal from the hard sectarian messiness, *lingua franca* and realities of that world in which Christians must live. One cannot say the same of Christian spirituality when practised according to the general tenor of the phenomenon herein described.

One might also conclude, with some credibility, that the wider dimensions of spirituality as relating to the *entire* experience of Christians now involves “ordinary” Christians in greater measure as “theologisers” in their own right. If spirituality constitutes a merging of the ascetical, mystical and ontological dimensions of lived life then such a phenomenon involves people, more entirely than before, in making sense of what is happening to them. It is no longer the professional theologian alone who must make sense of human experience. In this respect also the old unfortunate divide between professional theologising on the one hand and “lived life” on the other finds great rapprochement. Here too, contemporary spirituality achieves a greater inclusivity.

### 3. ACADEMIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Together with the interest in spirituality as lived experience, there is “the emergence of a revised *academic* discipline that studies spirituality” (McIntosh 1998:19). Once more, academic Christian Spirituality, as with “lived life” Christian spirituality, exhibits inclusivity, wholeness and integration. To be sure, some of the factors that make for a greater wholeness in contemporary spirituality

as “lived-life” surface once more within academic Christian Spirituality. We will endeavour, on the whole, not to cover this ground again. Needless to say, such congruency further establishes Christian Spirituality, as a whole, as less insular and prescriptive than former comparable theological disciplines.

To understand the greater inclusivity of *academic* Christian Spirituality, it is important to note the distinction between “Spiritual Theology” and “Spirituality” as an academic discipline. As mentioned earlier, “Spirituality” is Schneiders’ (1989:682) preferred academic designation, as opposed to the more dogmatic and prescriptive “Spiritual Theology.” For Schneiders (1989:682) “Spiritual Theology” is essentially governed by Dogmatic Theology, which traditionally claims “divine revelation” as its own preserve. But Schneiders (1989:689) finds “... most convincing and clarifying the position that regards spirituality as an *autonomous discipline* which functions in partnership and mutuality with theology.” For Schneiders, and thinkers like her, academic Spirituality, while inter-disciplinary and in serious engagement with theology, has a theory-praxis construct that comes with its own field of investigation.<sup>2</sup> Academic Spirituality aims to allow experience speak for itself. Spirituality as an academic discipline has to do with being-in-the-world. It can no longer be understood (as perhaps “Spiritual Theology” was) “as a solid, reassuring fortress, clearly demarcated by the boundaries of tradition, narrowly defined and unchanging” (King 1997:1).

Having briefly outlined the distinction between “Spirituality” and “Spiritual Theology” as academic disciplines, at least according to Schneiders and those of like persuasion, one can now see how Christian Spirituality enjoys a more inclusive and accommodating perspective. Academic Christian Spirituality is first of all part of a wider discipline, Spirituality-in-general, which is (or aspires to be) multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary. It is within such a disinterested academic school that Christian Spirituality in particular will find its place. In other words, Christian Spirituality (albeit *Christian*) becomes less insular and protected. It finds its place, unlike just about every other theological discipline, in an “a-theological” academy. What is more, its problems are not prematurely resolved by “theology.” It takes its place in the wider world of Spirituality-in-general, and therein subjects itself to the kind of general criteria that are appropriate to its own disciplinary field. It must be decidedly inter-disciplinary and in that respect encompass that world with which it has to engage. Needless to say, Christian Spirituality as part of this wider academy will

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2 A theological critique in Spirituality can be thoroughly theological without conforming to the kind that is operative in “Spiritual Theology.” Theology in Spirituality’s case, for example, could be appropriately seen as integral to the study of the experience itself. In fact this is precisely how Schneiders (1989:692) understands it. However, this is not to dispute or abandon Spirituality’s vital inter-disciplinary engagement with the broader field of theology as a whole.

be in particular engagement with Christian Theology. Nonetheless, its place in Schneiders' proposed school of "Spirituality-in-general" gives it a wider embrace and affirmation of the world in which it finds itself. Certainly it is a wider embrace and encompassment of life than has hitherto been evident in comparable theological disciplines.

In the cause of further elaboration one must note how Schneiders' (1989: 682) conviction that academic Spirituality needs to take an anthropological approach at once gives academic Spirituality a universal "in-touchness" and commonality with other disciplines. Hers is a Spirituality that is defined "from below," and not "from above." This approach, from below, invests Spirituality, as academic discipline, with universal scope and places academic Spirituality (and spirituality as "lived-life") within a scientifically approved field. It sets Spirituality and its perspectives and experiences within a universally acknowledged theoretical perspective and gives assent to the assertion that "human beings are spirit in the world..." (1989:682). Now "the structures and dynamics of the human person as such are the locus of the spiritual life" (1989:682). Schneiders is not alone. Hanson (1990:21) sees the spiritual life as a way of tackling anthropological questions in order to achieve a richer and more authentically human life. Academic Christian Spirituality's anthropological approach and its break from "Spiritual Theology" invest contemporary Spirituality, as a discipline, with an inter-cultural, inter-religious scope, which speaks of universality and inclusivity. It is true to say, of course, that this inclusivity pertains to academic Spirituality in the *general* sense. By extrapolation, however, we have shown how such inclusivity is also transmitted to academic Christian Spirituality as part of that general faculty.

Building on the deliberations under this heading, academic Spirituality realises its inclusive encompassment through the kind of criteria that are appropriate to its own field. As opposed to a "Spiritual Theology," which utilises a prescriptive-normative discipline as its academic *modus operandi*, Spirituality calls for the yardstick of descriptive-critical assessment. This descriptive-critical assessment does not *interfere*. It is clear that the latter assessment, in other words, permits a latitude of freedom that avoids premature closure, is appropriate to experience, and lets experience speak for itself. By virtue of that permission academic Spirituality takes its place in the world of every-day experience and is reconciled to the sacredness of all of life — and to the possibility that any experience can become a means of divine transaction and infusion.

Finally, it is important to raise (though briefly) the vexing problem of subjectivity within the academic discipline of Spirituality. How can personal involvement and spiritual subjectivity be permitted in a university discipline? How can Spirituality justify its place in the academy when such subjectivity seems to "come with the territory"? By the same token, how can subjectivity and personal experience be *avoided* in this case, given the nature of the subject?

And is not spirituality, given its more or less religious connotations, notoriously prone to subjective abuse, skewed vision and parochialism? There are no easy answers here. But can one not say that as Spirituality has its responsibility and vocation in precisely *this* area that it can be trusted with the appropriate evaluations of various experiences? Furthermore, particularly as it is an inter-disciplinary field and not a “Spiritual Theology,” it will be widely monitored and assessed for authenticity, albeit an authenticity somehow peculiar to itself. So can “insiders” be permitted as students of Spirituality? Sharpe (2005:42) writes:

[T]he insider knows by experience what to the outsider is mere conjecture; the insider is allowed access to “mysteries” which remain barred to the uninitiated. On the mundane level of such things as history and geography, on the other hand, the outsider may well be the better informed of the two. Whether the outsider can enter imaginatively into the insider’s “spiritual experience” is extremely doubtful.

Such is the difficulty. But the significance of the debate for this article is as follows: Might it be too extravagant to say that Spirituality, as contemporary academic discipline, may ultimately encompass its students more comprehensively than those students of the more “objective” or “scientific” disciplines? In this regard too, somewhat unexpectedly, Spirituality may emerge as “a field-encompassing field.”

#### 4. A CONTEXTUAL SPIRITUALITY

Contemporary Christian spirituality is contextual. It increasingly speaks the distinctive cultural and global language of the contemporary world. It is intelligible and readily assimilated into a globalised, post-modern and essentially “spiritually-hungry” twenty-first century. Indeed, the advent and popularity of spirituality is self-evidently the result of a successful and telling hermeneutic of the contemporary world-wide milieu. There is reciprocity, in other words, of twenty-first-century needs and self-understanding, and Christian spirituality’s capacity to deliver in the language and needs of the times.<sup>3</sup> Those features of spirituality that reflect a contextual affinity for the pervasive phenomena of globalisation and postmodernism are now described, in an effort to show the encompassing, global and inclusive nature of Christian spirituality.

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3 Naturally, none of this reciprocity suggests that contemporary Christian spirituality is singular and undifferentiated in its manifestations. Spirituality is not a monadic, “simple” and routinely-codified generic product. That is, Christian spirituality itself is diversified. It would be unfortunate and mistaken to conclude, on the basis of this article, that Christian spirituality is a finished, well-defined “singular” package, much as one might speak of a doctrine, or perhaps a standard exposition in credal theology.

## 4.1 Globalisation

Contemporary Christian spirituality is contextual because of its global spirit and hospitable ethos. Clearly globalisation has had a profound effect on Christian thinking. It has challenged the Christian's self-understanding and perceptions and put him/her in touch with forgotten or neglected traditions and imperatives. The thinking Christian has had but little choice than come to terms with a lived Christian faith for a globalised world. Obviously such a Christian has also answered from *within* the Christian faith and brought his/her own challenges to a church or Christian collegiate often stuck in a previous worldview. Still, might we not say that the greater compulsion to change seems to have come from outside the Church (or Christian) than from within? In some sense at least we are but children of our times.

The influence of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) upon the inception of "Christian spirituality" in general, and the Council's concomitant realisation of a more "world-friendly" Christian perspective in particular, can hardly be over-estimated. In short, the Council effected a hopeful openness to the modern world, and with it a wide impression of the continuity of God's grace working through Christian, non-Christian and God's wider world as a whole. Given the not-so-distant new world order of globalisation and postmodernism, this instinct proved intuitive, anticipative and prophetic.

Patently symbolic of the Second Vatican Council and Christian spirituality's global spirit, are the widely influential and insightful writings of the late Thomas Merton (1915-1968). To take one example only, the latter captures this universal, globalised spirit in his description of the Christian who has reached "final integration":

Final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond social adjustment, which always implies partiality and compromise. The man (*sic*) who is "fully born" has an entirely "inner experience of life." He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense "cosmic" and "universal man" (Merton 1971:211).

Merton's insight is still challenging, appealing and widely appreciated. He must surely sound a deep echo in contemporary spirituality's most progressive and creative proponents. There is a profound sense of universal kinship in Merton's (1967, 1971) spirituality, which often presupposes and indeed articulates the deep oneness of all humanity. Sheldrake (1991:50) describes a universal perspective and appreciation as one of the outstanding features of contemporary Christian spirituality: "[I]t is not exclusive — certainly not associated with any one Christian tradition, not even necessarily with Christianity as a whole." In the spirit of Merton and Sheldrake, Christians even begin to



appreciate a residual *Christian* point of identity in other peoples and, sometimes, other faiths. Such discoveries can prove most serendipitous and astonishing. For example:

Jesus was *astonished* by what he found — mature faith *outside* the church ... I long for a church that will again discover faith and hear God's call from within the public life of the secular (*sic*) world (Pitt 1995:37).

Increasing appeal to such texts is indicative of the global “pull” and spirit in spirituality. It is clear, then, that contemporary Christian spirituality's universal character is congruent with the global perspective of our times.

## 4.2 Postmodernism

Contemporary Christian spirituality is contextual because of its amenability to *postmodernism*. By virtue of this amenability, Christian spirituality again secures for itself an inclusiveness, or encompassment of life. A short description of postmodernism as it touches on this article is in order here. Postmodernism, at least in its effects, is scarcely distinguishable from globalisation, and makes a “spiritual-philosophic” (worldview) contribution to “at-one-ness.” *Postmodernism*, by definition, describes a departure from the modernistic worldview, which is typified by dualistic, compartmentalised estrangements or juxtapositions of one kind or another. For postmodernism, however, “the foundation of all social energies — economic, political and cultural — is spiritual” (Holland 1988:49). Furthermore, the postmodern person's identity is relationally constituted — with his/her body, the natural environment, family and culture. In postmodernism there is “a joy in *communion* ...” [italics ours] (Griffin 1988:14-15). By the same token the rigid entrenchments of (modernistic) “absolute truth” and “falsehood,” backed up by institutions, bureaucracies or dualism in general, are now “deconstructed” and relativised. Clean-cut “religious” answers are replaced by a capacity for, and appreciation of, mystery. Thus, notwithstanding postmodernism's integrative spirit, it also permits diversity and fragmentation within its largesse. Moreover, modernistic definitions of (or assumptions about) personhood and “its” centrality are revised. These are prominent features of a postmodern worldview or spirituality — essentially a worldview of “at-one-ness” or encompassment. Contemporary Christian spirituality, it is here contended, has in large part been able to endorse, and give Christian substance to, postmodernism's uniting proclivity.

By way of generalisation let it first be said that contemporary Christian spirituality resonates contextually with the description of postmodernism outlined above. Perhaps most pertinent and consequential of all, spirituality in its contemporary manifestation is *non-dualistic* and in that sense postmodern. Contemporary spirituality, as we have tried to show, has increasingly related to *all* of life and has become infiltrative or permeative of all life. Spirituality is

holistic. It is essentially “deconstructive” of the diminished role and territory that modernism inevitably gives to spirituality, or to spirituality’s comparable predecessors. Ironically, the contemporary church often seems to understand itself in the same “secularised,” that is to say “dualistic,” way so expressive of modernism. But it has been pointed out most felicitously that “a spiritual culture now surrounds a secular church” (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:72).<sup>4</sup> Spirituality in general, but also the kind of Christian spirituality herein described, is in stark contrast to the modernistic dualism still preferred by so much of the contemporary church. Suffice it to say then, that dualism is no friend of “at-one-ness,” but the non-dualistic, embracing nature of Christian spirituality realises a welcome encompassment and inclusiveness for spirituality.

Notwithstanding the previous paragraph’s claim that Christian spirituality resonates with postmodernism, it is still to be shown, though, how spirituality achieves that resonance. How has Christian spirituality managed to reinvent itself in order to find contextual intelligibility and appeal in a postmodern climate? Or, possibly in terms more acceptable to Christians: How has Christian spirituality utilised its own traditions in such a way that postmodernism has become an opportunity for spirituality (if not a serendipitous mentor, or παιδαγωγός) as opposed to a threat? The question is too wide and searching for justice to be done here. Nevertheless, some indigenous features of Christian spirituality and tradition may be confidently identified as particularly amenable to the spirit of postmodernism.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Ministers of mainline churches can scarcely deny that congregants are largely exponents and dupes of dualism. Many ministers, consciously or not, are in the same place. Consequently, our churches accord to religion a (largely marginalised) “part” of life. Our presuppositions, concepts and homiletic language evidence a self-incriminating dualistic stance. It must be strongly emphasised, therefore, that contemporary Christian spirituality is not usually integral to church membership. Most times it is not.

At the sunset of modernity, the church refuses to create a holistic spirituality for its people and fights to stay at the margins of society as a spiritual chaplain (Gibbs & Bolger: 2005:72).

The latter quote has enough of the ring of truth to elicit recognition and concurrence from most “mainline” ministers.

5 It is important, of course, to exercise an on-going critique of postmodernism. Not all postmodernism is good news for Christians. Neither is “postmodernism” universally standardised. Furthermore, one does not want to validate Christian spirituality according to its amenability to postmodernism. Related thereto might be the feeling here that Christian spirituality is being corrupted in an effort to universalise or postmodernise it. That is a serious matter indeed. “What of the scandalous particularity of the gospel?” one might ask. It is our contention that this “scandal” is not compromised by an understanding of contemporary Christian spirituality. Sometimes the “corruption” we sense, however, has more to do with our preference for a “modern,” dualistic Christianity – one that cannot abide the freedom of a sacralised, non-dualistic world.

## 4.2.1 Mysticism

Contemporary Christian spirituality has in some real measure retrieved its mystical tradition. As indicated earlier, this is in no small part due to the open and refreshing stance of the Second Vatican Council, which ultimately made possible a new universal access to the mystical dimension of Christian experience. Mysticism has a universal openness about it that is particularly amenable to a postmodern context. Furthermore, mysticism, it might be said in general, cultivates openness and non-prescriptive vulnerability to the “Other.” In mysticism, preconceived perceptions of God are challenged by “illumination,” one of the classic components of the mystical triad. The prayerful disposition becomes one of waiting and of a selfless readiness to encounter “mystery” — clearly a spiritual disposition pleasing to postmodernism and amenable to postmodernism’s aversion to foreclosure.

### 4.2.1.1 Theocentricism

Mystical openness and its non-prescriptive vulnerability give to Christian spirituality a more accommodative stance to those who do not, or cannot, begin their spiritual search with a Christological confession. Spirituality, in other words, evidences a broadening of consciousness that can be attributed to the *theocentric* nature of Christian mysticism. The mystical disposition allows for an appreciation of the universality of the divine, without foreclosing the nature of God in a particular acculturated or denominational view of Jesus. It offers a balance to the intense Christocentric theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968), for example, and introduces a healthy apophatic dimension. The mystical becomes a point of identification with non-Christian approaches. We are reminded that God is “bigger” than our comfortable concepts of God. King (1995:71) says that “[f]or the Christian explorer, Jesus is not so much our destination as our companion on the common human journey towards God.” Moreover, for congregants over-fed with a diet of folksy “Jesus religion,” and the intense parochialism that often goes with it, contemporary spirituality, through its mystical expression, can introduce a much-needed Trinitarian fullness. Christology is thereby relocated within its orthodox “economic” context.<sup>6</sup>

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6 There is also a Logos-mysticism, not entirely unlike accommodative theocentricism, which enables us to contemplate each created thing in God’s Λόγος. We discover the place, in Logos-mysticism, that every creature properly enjoys within the hierarchy of all things — each creature uniquely different and yet all inwardly related into a whole.

#### 4.2.1.2 Universal perspective<sup>7</sup>

In retrieving its own rich mystical tradition, contemporary spirituality acquires a wider, global perspective. Spirituality's universal, mystical outlook, therein achieves a certain synchronicity with the universal perspective of postmodernism. While postmodernism unquestionably envelopes diversity and fragmentation within its worldview, it nevertheless exhibits an overall wholeness, mutuality and "holding together." Through its retrieval of, and new accessibility to, its own mystical tradition, Christian spirituality is able to utilise the thinking of contemporary universal perspectives. It is a unique contribution of mysticism that it removes our blinkered vision, enabling us to "see" the world with new eyes. It allows Christians to leave their over-aculturated "mind-sets" and find an overview on the pluralities of the contemporary world.

What aspects of the Christian mystical tradition, specifically, make this universal embrace and outlook possible for spirituality? One might here point to the classic mystical triad of *purgation*, *illumination* and *union*. This triad, of course, is not an imposition on, or approximation to, Christian thinking. It is a reflective, time-tested description of the Christian mystical journey and experience. Through experiential adherence to the triad, Christians are able to discern the heart of their faith without over-subscribing to its more peripheral issues. But particularly the aspects of "illumination" and "union" have a universal identification that crosses religious boundaries. These aspects find echoes in Buddhism and in other Eastern spiritual traditions. They initiate a more eclectic perspective, embracing the cosmic and the human, the natural and the divine. Christian mystical experience, that is to say, evidences a universal commonality. That "[m]ystical experience is a becoming conscious of the essential oneness of created things with the primordial metaphysical reality of the divine, from which all differentiation flows" (Jager 1987:88).

For the purpose of giving flesh and historical grounding to the Christian mystical tradition (with the notable exception, amongst others, of indicating the Apostle Paul's mystical leanings) it is informative to listen to Tracy's (1996:422) historical enumeration of the great Christian mystical traditions:

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7 "Universal perspective" might seem to have been covered under the earlier heading, "globalisation." The distinction and separate treatment, however, seems deserving. "Globalisation" is a kind of technological reality to which spirituality has adapted through, for example, the Second Vatican Council's foresight and spirituality's "lived life" ingenuity. Postmodernism, while not unrelated to globalisation, is a philosophic or spiritual persuasion that must be met by Christian spirituality's appeal to its own historical traditions and self-understanding. This is how we have tried to delineate the contemporary world landscape, given the inevitability, indicated above, of "overlapping."

... the image tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and Origen and their development of a cosmic Christianity; the Trinitarian mysticism of the Cappadocians and Augustine and, above all, Ruysbroeck; and the great love mysticism tradition of the classic Cistercians and Bernard of Clairvaux to the great Spanish Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Given the intrinsic place that mysticism has had in Christian tradition, it is clear that a universalising postmodernism offers Christian spirituality a contextual environment for utilising its own mystical tradition. According to Matthews (2000:93), postmodernism and its amenability to mysticism “presents the Christian community with the opportunity to restate its faith with an integrity it has not been able to possess for several hundred years.”

#### 4.2.2 Ecumenical spirituality

Contemporary Christian spirituality constitutes a wide family. But while it shares the common attribute of *Christian*, it is unquestionably diverse in its internal aspect. Christian spirituality, taken as a whole, scarcely dissolves into an undifferentiated phenomenon. In fact, the various “fields” within the wider Christian “field” undoubtedly have times when they do not blend so easily together. The point here is that spirituality is again *contextual* precisely through its mirroring or affirmation of postmodernism’s “unity in diversity,” or “fragmentation” within a greater whole. But more to the point, by virtue of its “diversity in unity” Christian spirituality, as with postmodernism, again evidences an obvious encompassment – and an inferred acknowledgement and affirmation of “unity in diversity.” *Spirituality’s ecumenicity, to be sure, corresponds to an ecumenicity that is integral to postmodernism.* Contemporary Christian spirituality evidences an embrace of diverse Christian traditions while at the same time becoming a new meeting point for their patrons. Indeed, contemporary Christian faith, as lived experience or academic discipline, is a source rich in multi-denominational spiritualities and insights. Taizé, Vatican II, the Lambeth Conference of 1968, the Charismatic Renewal and Thomas Merton’s profound spirituality, have all had their influence in creating openness, flexibility and an expression of Christian spirituality that transcends traditional boundaries. More so, we can even speak “of a genuinely ‘ecumenical spirituality’ which creates new lines of identity and loyalty as well as struggle within and across traditions” (Dupré & Saliers 1989:528).

It is most important to note, however, that Christian spirituality is not only ecumenical in terms of its internal arrangement. (Perhaps Christian “ecological,” “liberation” and “feminist” spiritualities are already evidence of something larger and more universal than traditional Christian pursuits.) Christian spirituality has the elasticity and incorporative possibility that is not traditionally a feature of dogmatic theology. A major part of this capacity, as indicated above,

comes by way of Christian spirituality taking its place in a wider general academy that to some real extent shares the same vocation as its Christian faculty. Christian spirituality therefore has a potential to unite, or to encompass diversity, in a way that dogmatic theology does not. Indeed “what has become possible in modern (*sic*) times is a recognition of the convergent spirituality underlying the religious diversity of the world” (Ward 2000:70).

Where Christian spirituality truly fulfils its vocation it will reveal a wider consciousness and encompassment than traditional religions are able to do. The latter are often inflexible, dogmatic, culturally embedded and mutually hostile. Specialised theologians increasingly use the common language of Christian spirituality to express insights and concerns that arguably could not be addressed within their own theological science.

#### 4.2.3 Trinitarianism, “incorporation” and “kenosis.”

Trinitarianism, “incorporation” and “kenosis” are integrative Christian experiences that strike a deep chord in postmodernism’s integrating, relational and “decentralising” spirituality. If popular Christian faith is largely ignorant of these three integrative Christian concepts it is because they have remained *just* that for many Christians — namely, abstruse concepts, innocuous religious terms or intellectual doctrines. Christian spirituality, however, brings out the spiritual dynamic of these doctrines or words. Spirituality, moreover, reveals that it was in fact the experiential dynamic that gave birth to these doctrines and terms in the first place, and not the other way round. Again it must be noted that Christian spirituality not only “finds a match” in the postmodern spirituality herein described, but also exhibits integrative encompassment in so doing. A brief look at these three integrative Christian concepts is important.

Engagement with “the Trinity” or “Trinitarianism” has more frequently than not been an exclusively intellectual activity, happily delegated to professional theologians. What Christian spirituality has done is to recover the essentially *practical* Trinity that incorporates us into the Trinitarian life. “The doctrine of the Trinity is in fact the most practical of all doctrines” (La Cugna 2000:278). The Trinity, or more particularly the “economic” trinity, relates to God’s dynamic life of giving and receiving. But human beings are *included* in that divine relational life of give and take (La Cugna 2000:278). That is to say, Christian living is a sharing in the triune life of God — the life that the Father shares with the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. That participative life in the Trinity has sometimes been understood in an individualistic way — that is, as each person participating separately within the triune life, or as the Trinity indwelling each individual following a psychological analogy. But there is a healthier Trinitarian spirituality. It works on the sound principle that “[t]he Son becomes a member of the

human *community* in order to bring *humans* into the divine community of the Holy Trinity” (Gresham 2000:287; italics ours).

If one recognises the participative, “diversity in unity” dynamic of Trinitarian spirituality one appreciates how it at once achieves two imperatives in an incomparable way: First, it ensures that Christian spirituality remains truly *Christian*. Second, such Trinitarian spirituality corresponds significantly with the encompassment dynamic of postmodernism, and therein also secures a convincing contextuality.

Related to Trinitarianism in its incorporative dynamic is the Apostle Paul’s understanding of being “in Christ.” This expression, ἐν Χριστῷ, occurs “very frequently in St. Paul in varying forms; the full form seems to be ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (Rom. 6:11)” (Richardson 1974:249). Being “in Christ” is synonymous with corporate relationship and delivers us from the individualistic flavour of modernism. Indeed, “the preposition ‘in’ from the “in-Christ” formula has therefore both mystical and *sociative* connotations, notwithstanding the fact that each member of the body is a distinct person (Kourie 1998:447-448; italics ours). The latter believes that we need to rediscover the true Apostle Paul, whose teaching too often has been understood only in a juridical way and not in the mystical and participatory manner of “union with God in Christ” (Kourie 1998:447).

“Kenosis,” or “self-emptying” (Phil. 2:7), is a New Testament word that refers to Christ’s dispossession and out-pouring of self. The concept of *kenosis* introduces us to a self-relinquishment that is consonant with our understanding of God’s revelation in Christ. “Kenosis” bears some real kinship with postmodernism’s “decentring” of the self, “an awareness that the self is not a distinguishable reality which interprets and validates all other realities” (Matthews 2000:91). Importantly, the similarity of “kenosis” and “decentring” (if not their absolute identity) shares a sense of the displacement of the self and its ultimate reliability. In “decentring” we have a perception of self as integrally one with humankind and devoid of *hubris*.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Christian spirituality is globally conscious and universally aligned. It exhibits an encompassment and accommodation that is at once identifiable as part of its own indigenous (often reclaimed) tradition but also consonant with globalisation, postmodernism and the worldview of our times. While contemporary Christian spirituality is diverse and differentiated, it manifests a *post*-modern non-dualism and accommodation that is true of spirituality as a whole: whether “lived-life,” academic discipline, ecumenical, mystical or Trinitarian spirituality. As such, contemporary spirituality is an encompassing field, even encompassing a host of fields. In fact, the various encompassed concentric

circles can become confusing. But through contemporary Christian spirituality, (most times not the conventional “church spirituality”) the Christian faith abandons its isolated role of chaplain to an estranged world. It becomes an encompassing field of that world that “God loved so much” (Jn 3:16).

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