

THE FIRST YEARS
of
SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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When Pieter (de Villiers, President, SSCS) asked me to say something about the “Origin and First Phase” of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality I immediately said “yes.” After all, I had been part of this enterprise from the time, before the existence of the Society which was inaugurated in 1992 [or 1991 -- see remarks of David Perrin], when a few of us academic “hippies” met in coffee shops and on park benches and in elevators during the annual joint meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature to talk about our interest in a field that few academics at that time believed existed and which we only gradually began to call “spirituality.” Our interest was met, often enough, by the bewilderment if not the condescending dismissal of our more “serious” colleagues in biblical studies, theology, Church history and other “real” religious studies disciplines. But after gladly saying yes to Pieter’s invitation I discovered that those early years of the Society’s foundation and development have, apparently, not been officially or consistently chronicled. And my memory of these important matters, although vivid and pleasant, is highly selective at best. I have tried to construct a rough chronology of the first years but what I am going to say may be more impressionistic than the auspicious occasion of this international meeting deserves and any corrections, now or later, would be very welcome.

One thing that seems relatively certain is that the Society was officially founded in 1992 as a member society of the American Academy of Religion. But I was not successful in tracing

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the development of the current format of our annual meeting which, however, is significant, no matter when each element emerged or was incorporated. From the founding of the Society our annual meeting has been held in conjunction with and within the format of the annual joint convention of the AAR and SBL which revealed quite clearly where people interested in field of spirituality placed themselves academically namely, in the midst of the academic ferment around religious topics. The SSCS meeting format now includes a Friday afternoon pre-meeting at the AAR/SBL convention site on some practical/pastoral dimension or aspect of spirituality and an experiential event that evening usually stimulated by some characteristic of the locale of the AAR/SBL convention (for example, a visit to the sites of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and career when the AAR/SBL met in Atlanta, GA); the presidential address followed by discussion on some research aspect of the academic discipline itself and the annual Business Meeting on Saturday, and, on the following two to three days, partnering with some other member societies in the AAR for inter- or cross-disciplinary papers and discussion of matters of mutual interest in such areas as psychology, the visual arts, philosophy of religion, mysticism, history, literature, sociology, and so on.

This format highlights several characteristics of the Society's involvement with its subject which emerged early in its life and have marked it to this day. Most notable is the variety of facets to the enterprise of studying spirituality: that it is academic in the strict research sense of that word, but that it is, also, practical/pastoral and pedagogical; it involves serious, cutting edge research approaching spirituality from a wide range of disciplines such as history, theology, philosophy, the personal and social sciences, ecology, cultural studies, literary studies, aesthetics, and other disciplinary perspectives; it is socially and culturally situated not only historically but also today; it is not only the object of study but also a site of participation; it is intrinsically inter-

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disciplinary rather than self-contained (either in terms of content or of methodology). And, of course, the very context in which we find ourselves at this very moment -- an inter-cultural and ecumenical environment here in Zürich --testifies to the inherently inclusive character of the field.

In trying to locate a copy of my own presidential address delivered in 1997, in which I addressed the issue Pieter invited me to discuss here, namely, the contours and dynamics of the discipline, I unearthed a little history of our development in terms of publication. This aspect of the Society's life will always be gratefully associated with the name of Douglas Christie, now a professor of spirituality at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. He was convinced that a community of scholarship had to be based in conversation in and about our field and such could only mature if we had a common and distinctive place of publication. With the collaboration of a few of us who shared his conviction enough to serve on the first editorial board, he founded, in 1993, a lively scholarly "newsletter" which was, in reality, a mini-journal called *The Christian Spirituality Bulletin*. This beloved and youthfully classy blue four-pager, which many can remember as perhaps the first place they published, the *CSB*, eventually matured, in 2001, into the very distinguished current scholarly journal, *Spiritus*. In a certain sense the emergence of *Spiritus*, now edited by Stephen Chase and prestigiously published by Johns Hopkins University Press is in its seventeenth year. It both expresses and has fostered the definitive emergence of the contemporary discipline of Christian spirituality as a mature and distinctive discipline in the modern academy.

When I finally tracked down my 1997 presidential addresss, on the academic study of Christian spirituality, to see how I and others understood our field at that time, I saw that I had discussed (at almost indecent length and in possibly exhausting detail!) the material and formal

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objects of the discipline, its inter-disciplinary methodology, its inter-religious self-situation in the academy, its constructive post-modern sensibility, and the self-implicating character of research in the field. Obviously, it is neither possible nor desirable to review these topics here. But perhaps, in order to glimpse where we were in those earliest days of the Society in relation to where we are now, 25 years later, it would suffice to look at how we named the new academic entity we were founding. We decided to call it the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Let me just say a word about the three operative terms in that title, but in reverse order.

First, it took some courage back in 1992 to decide to call it a society for scholars in SPIRITUALITY. The term “spirituality,” twenty-five years ago, was highly suspect in the academy. In the still glorious days of the triumph of scientific empiricism a term like “spirituality” sounded hopelessly un-rigorous. It connoted for many “piety,” more or less equated with religious emotionalism, lack of scientific rigor, denominationalism if not exclusivism, dogmatism and authoritarianism, or almost anything vaguely or explicitly non- or anti- scholarly. Choosing to name our field, not to appease the going prejudices in the academy but in terms of how we, scholars in this new field (which actually has a history as long as Christianity although the terminology current today was not used in the deserts of Asia Minor, the medieval monasteries, and their successors) were defining our area of interest, namely, the whole terrain of religious experience, as frankly religious and as unabashedly experiential, was a courageous and thoughtful choice. Obviously, today we do not have to explain or apologize for our choice of the term spirituality because the importance of experience in every area of life, including the academy, is no longer in question. And religion, running the gamut from fundamentalist extremism to full blown mysticism, is centrally important -- both positively and negatively -- in contemporary culture across the globe.

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Secondly we specified a particular spirituality, namely, CHRISTIAN, as the focus of our work, because, in fact, virtually all of those of us engaged in this new academic venture were situated existentially and by our professional interests and commitments in the Christian religious tradition. We were denominationally diverse -- Protestants of many stripes, Catholics, Orthodox, and “spiritual but not religious” refugees from various strands of Christianity -- but our common roots were in Christian Scripture, both Testaments and the tradition that interprets that collection of writings. Our confidence then has been borne out into the present, that situating ourselves as scholars frankly and without apology in our own religious tradition would not wall us off in exclusivity or denominationalism or fundamentalism but, on the contrary, supply a solid foundation from which to engage other religious traditions and even non-religious spiritual enterprises as well as to critique and challenge our own tradition.

Thirdly, we called it a Society for the STUDY of Christian spirituality, thereby situating our project clearly in the academy to whose standards we would be accountable and to whose challenges and questions we would commit ourselves to respond. But we did not specify what we meant by “study” because we knew, I think, intuitively if not always explicitly, that study can embrace more in terms of subject matter and in terms of methodology than the academy was always ready to admit or recognize. Paths to knowledge can involve praxis, dialogue, immersion, and conversation as well as standard literature and laboratory research and scholarly exchange.

Undoubtedly, many of our realizations back in the 1990’s were inchoate and intuitional, based on our own experience, interests, breakthroughs, and hunches and those of our students, our fellow believers, our clients. but I think if we were to re-visit today the question of how we would name our Society we could not come up with a better name, with one more expressive of

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who we are as a Society, what we are trying to achieve as scholars, teachers, and practitioners who do not choose to pursue any of these aspects in disjunction from the others, our situation in the academy as rooted in a religious tradition whose lived experience needs and deserves to be studied with full scholarly rigor and full personal commitment. And I doubt that anything I could say now about the first couple decades of the Society's existence would be more clarifying than its name. That fits well, I think, with the theology and spirituality of naming in our tradition which is rooted in God's mysterious gift to humanity of a Name that will always call us toward the Burning Bush of Divine encounter.

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