

# Chapter 1

## The Landscape

Spirituality is an exceedingly captivating topic, and of enormous interest today, although our recent past shows that this was not always the case. Threatened by a thriving twentieth-century naturalism, bolstered by the rising force of a scientific worldview, spirituality looked like it might disappear. A coercive secularization of culture and church was also well underway, and it seemed as if this powerful alliance would extinguish the pursuit of a spiritual life and experience.

Yet, stunningly, the opposite is taking place and spirituality is flourishing. In the twilight of the twentieth-century, and early in the twenty-first, there is an extraordinary attraction to spirituality. This prevalence is clearly visible in North America and Europe, but also evident in other regions of the planet. Intrigued by the mysteries, uncertainties, and perplexities of life, the quest for spirituality enchants us. We passionately search for that which is within or beyond to help us explain the world, but so often get confused and are unsure of the way forward.

Think of the popularity of films like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, and *The Passion*; books like Rick Warren's, *The Purpose Driven Life* and Thomas Moore's, *Care of the Soul*; TV shows like Oprah; the music of Nick Cave, Sting, and U2. They all express one spiritual focus or another. These media, and their phenomenal success, are piercing echoes of our current interest in spirituality. And it is a seemingly unquenchable interest. Clearly, a fascination with spirituality is now everywhere. While a pursuit of the spiritual may be positive, I wonder where all this fervor leaves us.

### Into the Ambiguous

My view on this is that in spite of the enchantment with spirituality in our times, the perplexity of the subject remains daunting. Significant questions arise. What is spirituality? And how is it to be cultivated and lived today?

To heighten the importance of responding to these questions just reflect for a moment. We now live in a culture where proliferations of spiritualities are circulating in a wide diversity of expressions. There is no lack of spiritual options for us. Our world is clogged with a concoction of new age, kitsch, neo-pagan, as well as cultural, non-Christian, and Christian persuasions. We're offered the realms of *shuffle* and *shopping* spirituality. Anything goes. Just mix it all together and hope for the best. What are we to make of all this, and where is it leading us?

One of my main interests in writing this book is to address the escalating forms of ambiguity in the "shuffle" and "shopping" spirituality of our times and to offer a Christian response. I do so particularly for Christian readers, but also for those who struggle with a sense of being adrift in the sea of spiritualities currently available.

Increasing ambiguity is reigning. As I see it, the spiritual predicament confronting Christians today presents a two-fold challenge: the rising attraction to cultural and non-Christian forms of spirituality on the one hand, and the impoverishment of Christian spirituality on the other.

To begin I'd like to sketch out the first challenge and its contribution to ambiguity: the growing allure of cultural and non-Christian forms of spirituality. In the context of our enhanced awareness and updated interest in the search for spirituality some say that a spiritual revolution is taking place. One manifestation goes something like this—being *spiritual* is whatever you make it to be. You buy into the marketing strategies of the random, of surpassing the mundane, and of reveling in fragmentation. You have come to believe that if you just turn up the volume on your iPod or stereo and hit "shuffle" the music will transport you into the world of your reveries.

This supposedly safe or enriching spiritual space is just one of many mistaken for living spirituality. While searching for the soundtrack to your life, you don't truly listen to the words being sung to you. This easy and free approach of "shuffle spirituality" reinforces the contemporary mindset of a *make it up as you go along* spirituality, but lacks any real power to transform lives.

Another manifestation that many adhere to views the search for spirituality as an exercise in comparison shopping to find just the right style of religion or spirituality for you. A friend recently shared an example of this with me. It came in the form of a cardboard wheel with an arrow that one could spin around and in so doing view the offer of thirty religious options.

The marketing technique was, "choose your own religion: a search engine for life." The label acknowledged the significance of spirituality yet touted any religious persuasion or combination of them as an equally valid way to the spiritual. The less direct message was: compare and shop for whatever religious orientation suits you. This guide to religion attempts to banish your anxiety by animating fashionable "shopping spirituality," but it falls far short of any authentic capacity to regenerate lives.

In addition to "shuffle" and "shopping" spirituality there are further examples of our spiritually ambiguous times everywhere; such as fundamentalist terrorism, dwindling church attendance, polarized religious relativism or dogmatism, the stunning popularity of

kitsch portrayed by religious trinkets propped up on one's desk or dashboard, and various formulations of a thriving postmodern religion without a transcendent-redemptive God. The times are mystifying. Each of these trends tells part of the confusing spiritual story of our age. In the midst of the driving enthusiasm and obsessive quest for a spiritual life, *spirituality* has come to mean everything, yet nothing.

As Christians, what are we to make of this? Should the spirituality frenzy today be viewed positively, negatively, or simply ignored? Do we just go with the flow, trusting that whatever is trendy is spiritual? Are we to simply embrace any one of the plethora of cultural or religious forms and modes of spirituality without thinking about it? My concern is that we lack an informed response to these types of questions.

### **Invitation to Grace and New Life**

Before turning to the second challenge, the impoverishment of Christian spirituality, I think it is important to tell you where I'm coming from. Why? As the author of this book, I believe that you should know where I stand and kneel as one who has received the Infinite One's offer of grace, redemption, and community. And I want you to see the broader application of this as it relates to the search for spirituality.

I wish to make two key perspectives clear. First, the "living" in *living spirituality*, as I am using it, is both verb and adjective. That is, this spirituality is to "be lived" and it is a spirituality that "is living." Second, it is my view that to make contact with the source of this spirituality, to come into a living and dynamic community with the One who makes spirituality happen, it is essential to be a Christian. The Bible teaches us that in order to be living spirituality in our present context, we must first be disciples of Jesus.

This, of course, may appear obvious. Yet in our Western and broadly ambiguous and spiritually relativistic cultural context, there is an urgency to think again. A vast spectrum of people have some notion of spirituality, although they are not necessarily followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, while others who may acknowledge Christ, seek to incorporate diverse cultural or non-Christian forms of spirituality into their lives. If all paths lead to spirituality, then why bother with distinctions?

Living spirituality without distinction, however, is an illusion. It is important to underline this. From a Christian perspective conversion to Christ is *the* only gateway to a truly spiritual life. In order to illustrate this access into true community with God, and to highlight living spirituality as a distinct spirituality, I want to give you two real life examples that reflect two characters portrayed in John's gospel.

#### ***Jerry's story***

Jerry came into my office for another tutorial. He had been at L'Abri for several months deeply wrestling with serious questions and issues. As a God-fearing man from a Jewish family, Jerry had a meticulous view of keeping rules, codes and regimes that he embraced as spiritual. During his time in the community here, some of this understanding began to crumble, bringing to light crucial questions about life, death, and spirituality. In our tutorial

we discussed many significant ideas and struggles relating to these issues. “Greg,” he asked finally, “what is life all about? I have heard of Jesus, but how does he have anything to do with it?”

For a start, I told him, Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of Israel and the world. He taught many radical and innovative things. One of the most important was that he can release you from sin, which separates you from God. Being born anew, to be born of water and Spirit are necessary if you are to enter into community with God and to be living spirituality. So it is: Flesh produces flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. It all begins here. Jerry listened carefully and took this away with him that day.

### ***Sheila’s story***

Sheila shared some of the same concerns as Jerry, but came from a different background and situation. She was brought up in a Christian family, was divorced, and was involved with a man who was not her husband. In her social context, many viewed her as an outcast, and she had come here seeking shelter and refuge.

The time in the community challenged her to reflect on truth and the path to spiritual rejuvenation of moving from death to life. One day I was out for a walk, and I passed her on the village road. She stopped to ask me a question. In puzzled dismay, Sheila wondered if she could be a spiritual person. She had been battling with the question for months. “What does Jesus have to do with life and death?” she asked. We sat on a bench nearby and talked it over.

Following an intense discussion on the dynamics of life and death, moral culpability before God, grace, and the need for redemption, I mentioned that Jesus is the one who offers her living water. The promise to her, and to anyone who drinks this water, is that they will never be thirsty. It is the water of everlasting life that gives you community with God, ushers you into living spirituality, and quenches your thirst forever. She went on to learn a lesson that we all must learn: God is spirit, and everyone—regardless of race or creed—is to worship him in spirit and truth.

These two real life scenarios, with the answers given modeled on Jesus’ teaching to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, point us to the only way into community with God and living spirituality. Jesus is the gateway. Everyone is invited. Neither Jesus, nor the Spirit imposes a selective guest list. Whether we are like Jerry or Sheila, or from an entirely different situation or place, we are offered superabundant grace through Jesus Christ and the agency of the Spirit.

When it is understood that Jesus Christ is the gateway to living spirituality, significant opportunities open up for us: to be in community with the Infinite-personal God, to taste living water, and to experience a new birth of the Spirit through faith in the crucified and risen One. When we accept the invitation to walk through the gateway, our world *explodes* because we confess that it’s no longer centered on ourselves or all about us. And it is then that we start to find our place in living spirituality and to discover the true meaning of life in all its richness and mystery.

Living and true spirituality therefore is deeply rooted in following Jesus. Walking through the gateway is essential. To follow the crucified and risen One is not a matter of giving a performance, reciting a mantra, or having a religious inclination or feeling. First and foremost, it is a matter of the whole person acknowledging and then bowing before the God who is there, accepting Christ as Lord and Savior, and receiving the gift of the Spirit.

This is the beginning of a life-long journey—a task and a joy. But it is merely the beginning. The true spiritual life is not less than stepping through the gateway, but inevitably much, much more as we will see later.

### **Spiritual Impoverishment and Adding to the Ambiguity**

After understanding the importance of following Jesus and receiving new life to be living spirituality, we are now going to face the second challenge: impoverished Christian spirituality and its contribution to increased ambiguity.

Impoverishment takes many forms and may be expressed in several ways. Christians, perhaps unwittingly, often contribute to the spirituality chaos of our times, instead of helping to diminish it. We fuel the flames of unacceptable degrees of ambiguity. How? One of the major, if not-so-obvious ways we contribute is through our tendency to succumb to false, but powerful *absolutizing* forces that may approach us or even reside in us. Some, for example, assume that Christian spirituality is absolutely anchored in reason, seeing, feeling, or experience. This type of absolutizing may seem to counter ambiguity, but it actually increases it by attempting to encapsulate spirituality in a one-dimensional manner and to do away with a necessary dialogical tension, which I will say more about later.

For now, let's take a closer look at one of the most prominent examples of false absolutizing in today's context: feeling. Numerous Christians have informed me that spirituality is what they feel. If that is the case, as they believe, then it can be spiritual to break vows and commitments when feeling depressed, to ignore a job contract when feeling overworked, to take a vacation instead of paying bills when feeling spring fever, or to divorce one's husband or wife when feeling unloved. The danger of such a highly subjective perspective is that it dupes us and others to buy into a warped notion of Christian spirituality.

Within "feeling" Christian circles, the concept of spirituality becomes highly mystifying. It turns into feeling without content, which then becomes absolute and unquestionable. It also happens, often unwittingly, to become the same as anyone else's spirituality and therefore contributes to ambiguity. Do these sound familiar?

*If you feel it, it's spiritual.*

*If you feel it, it must be true.*

Don't get me wrong, feelings are a wonderful part of being human, and they do have a key place in living spirituality. But there is a problem if absolutized feelings reign. If we merely equate feelings with truth and spirituality, how do we ever critique them?

When it comes to spirituality these days, a critical perspective is frequently missing. Such a critique is unlikely in today's environment, because we are driven—even consumed by—feeling. Our lives are dominated by how we feel, what we feel, and when we feel it. In this context, our feelings become absolutized and function as the sole determiner of what constitutes spirituality. Operating with this kind of blind trust in feelings, we fail to recognize their potential deficiency for determining what is true or spiritual, and this leaves us wide open for self-deception.

Again, I am not saying that we can or should ignore our feelings. They can often be indicators of a deep longing for love, accurate suspicion, and the quest for hope. But neither should we be enslaved to feelings, because they can also deceive us. Therefore, it is important to be able to check them for trustworthiness. To do so we need to be in a personal and community *dialogue* with God, the crucified and risen Christ, the Spirit, the biblical text, other people in community, and the world in which we live. These dialogue partners will lead us into a deeper contemplation of what is truly spiritual.

Sound complicated? Well, it is. To begin to reverse the flow of spiritual impoverishment and to diminish ambiguity, it is essential to realize that the scope of living spirituality is a complex and dynamic matter that requires us to take into consideration more than the way we *feel*. To *feel* that this or that is spiritual is a feeling. On its own, it is unable to help us navigate our way through to a living spirituality, which is dependent on far more than the way we feel.

In addition to feelings and the dialogue partners mentioned above, I also want to include rationality, sense observation, experience, and imagination as having a role in living spirituality. Yet when feelings or any of these other perspectives reign absolute, we risk losing any potential for critical distance, and we exclude dialogue, which means that our interaction with other partners and orientations borders on irrelevance or worse, non-existence.

This leads us to several questions: How should followers of Jesus evaluate spirituality? Do we have cause for queries? Is our spirituality really true and living? To start answering these questions and to further work our way towards diminishing ambiguity and reversing spiritual impoverishment, let's briefly chart out some of the dynamics for living spirituality that are important to have in place.