

Topic 1: An Introduction to Seven Great Schools of Christian Spirituality

Overview: In the introduction to this course, we consider the broad strokes of the seven schools in Christian spirituality that we identify as being great schools. We call these schools great because the founder who had the initial impulse in the development of spirituality unfolded something new, an element that brought spirituality to its next historical level. Those who embraced the insight of the founder usually nuanced it and applied it to new centuries and changing circumstances. As each new school emerged, it embraced an earlier tradition, built upon it, and then brought it to a new place. As we journey through this course, the challenge is to understand the evolving nature of each school and how this relates to your experience and the place you find yourself at this moment on your journey.

The Human Impulse towards the Transcendent :

- Every human, without exception, is looking for “the something more.”
- St. Augustine: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.”
- We can move towards the transcendent in different ways.
- A spirituality of beauty:

1) In his Apostolic Exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis affirms the role of beauty in the spiritual life.

2) We can see these seven schools of Christian spirituality as moments of beauty. The human spirit is moving towards the beautiful.

Seven Schools of Christian Spirituality: Each group or movement builds on what went before it and transcends it, moving to the next step in the historical and global journey.

1) Desert spirituality emerged in response to the institutionalization of Christianity and the end of the martyrdom era. Desert spirituality built on the scriptures and emphasized the desert experience, which focused on a withdrawal from the world.

2) Monastic spirituality included components of desert spirituality and added a communal dimension to it.

3) The mendicant movements (Franciscan, Dominican, and Carmelite) built upon desert spirituality and the monastic tradition but moved the monastery into the marketplace.

- 4) Ignatian Spirituality gave an intellectual framework and methodology to spirituality. It was clearly a movement beyond monastic structures that still included the monastic spiritual tradition.
- 5) Salesian Spirituality: St. Francis De Sales and St. Jane de Chantal carried the best of the tradition through a spirituality that emphasized gentleness in the age of Jansenism. The seventeenth century saw a movement into apostolic spiritualities.
- 6) The Vincentian-Setonian Tradition: St. Vincent DePaul and St. Louise de Marillac created the framework for contemporary apostolic communities. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton brought that tradition to America.

Three Symbols for the Development of the Spirituality Traditions

1. The Heart as spiritual home: all seven schools converge in the human heart. The human heart is the seat of wonder, and the seat from which we see and come to know God.
2. The Rainbow: the colors of the seven schools blend together to create a gorgeous rainbow. They are seven manifestations of the movements of God. We should not look at these seven colors as separate entities. We should instead focus on the way in which the seven colors blend together and lead us to new places.
3. The Onion: Each school of spirituality peels over a layer and brings the tradition deeper. Each school builds on the ones that preceded it. We should ask how we can integrate the seven strains and go deeper in our own spiritual lives.

What Is Christian Spirituality? Christian spirituality arose within the Jewish spiritual tradition of God's abiding love and presence.

1) Jewish Roots:

- (a) Exodus
- (b) Covenant
- (c) Prophets
- (d) Psalms

2) Christianity builds on its Jewish roots and brings it to a new place.

- (a) There was a gradual movement away from Jewish laws and images of God.

(b) Matthew 4–6 reflects the new Christian worldview.

3) There are four key components to Christian spirituality:

(a) It is Christocentric, focused on the life, teachings, and presence of Jesus Christ.

(b) It is Trinitarian.

(c) It is biblically rooted. Christian tradition is rooted in the text of the Old and New Testaments.

(d) It is ecclesial. Christian spirituality is lived in the context of community.

Review Questions

1. The basic human impulse is towards the transcendent. Reflect on your experience of the God in your life. To what extent is it God who is seeking you? Do you experience God as the “Hound of Heaven”?

2. Which of the seven schools of spirituality do you most identify with? How can you build on your basic instinct towards this spirituality?

3. What symbol do you resonate with: the heart, the rainbow, or the onion?