

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**ESSAY**

**The Spiritual Classics and Their Contribution to Spiritual Growth**

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO  
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## SRG405 – Formative Spirituality

## Assignment #3 – Essay

**The Spiritual Classics and Their Contribution to Spiritual Growth**

“The unending quest for loving union and communion with God runs like a golden thread throughout the Christian centuries . . . The vision of God occurs in a dazzling darkness brighter than the brightest light. It is a vision of great splendour and empowerment that [spiritual classics] ceaselessly describe, even when affirming that it is entirely incommunicable. The long line of [spiritual classics] represents the great company of seers who want to pass on to us the precious riches bestowed upon them”.<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses the question of how the spiritual classics can contribute to the spirituality and spiritual growth of Christians today.

Of the many definitions of *spirituality*, Sandra Schneiders provides one of the most encompassing: Spirituality is “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”.<sup>2</sup> For Christians, the ultimate concern is God revealed in Jesus Christ, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1998), 8. I realize that Ursula King is specifically referring to Christian mystics in this quotation. However, the Christian mystics have written spiritual classics, and therefore I have applied the quotation as applicable to the spiritual classics.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy”, *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 684.

experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and within the life of the church.<sup>3</sup> *Spiritual growth* entails growing in the ability for self-transcendence whereby one moves out of compulsive, addictive, and obsessive patterns of behavior toward more healthy relationships with oneself, other persons, and God.<sup>4</sup> In short, Christian spirituality, involving spiritual growth, is the conscious human response to God that is both personal and ecclesial – it is life in the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Having defined spirituality and spiritual growth, this essay now examines the reading of spiritual classics from the point of view of their contribution to spiritual growth. The term *spiritual classics* has been defined by author Ronald Klug as those “great books in which Christian thinkers have shared their wisdom about the Christian life, especially the life of prayer and the inner life with God. These classics are often densely packed with wisdom, and are best read in short sections, pondering their meaning and applying it to our own lives as we do in meditating on the Bible”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the spiritual classics are timeless pieces of literature, containing gems of living wisdom which is undimmed by the passage of centuries.<sup>7</sup> Five areas, each fostering spiritual growth when drawn upon, are discussed as follows: critical reading, historical context, the spiritual writer, the spiritual reader, and reading from the heart.

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<sup>3</sup> William Thompson, “Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness”, *Review for Religious* 51, no. 5 (1992): 648.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, “Spirituality, Spiritual Development and Holiness”, 648.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 82-83. I have included a somewhat expanded definition here since it ties in with the thrust of the essay – showing how the spiritual classics contribute to spiritual growth. Klug lists some of the best-loved classics that deserve careful reading as follows: Brother Lawrence, *the Practice of the Presence of God*; Augustine, *Confessions*; Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*; Thomas Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*; Evelyn Underhill, *School of Charity*; Francois Fenelon, *Christian Perfection*; St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Wright, “The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides”, *The Way Supplement* 73 (1992): 37.

### **Recognizing the Need for Critical Reading**

To gain spiritual nourishment from the spiritual classics, a reader must recognize that uncritical reading of writing penned centuries ago could lead to a number of real difficulties – such as undue fearfulness, narrow self-righteousness, impatient intolerance, or slavish literalism.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the reader must recognize the numerous literary genres in which spiritual experience has been celebrated and described in the spiritual classics – for example, aphorisms, sayings, poems, hymns, essays, and autobiographies.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in reading the spiritual classics, one can develop a healthy critical sense in regard to contemporary sources (rather than only reading recent books and making them the standard).<sup>10</sup>

### **Understanding the Historical Context**

The spiritual classics speak across the centuries, and if a person is to benefit spiritually, they must be aware of the historical context in which they were written. It becomes imperative, therefore, to consider such aspects as the history of the period, the explicit and implicit values, the audience addressed, and the author himself or herself.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 below presents a broad outline of overall trends or movements in the history of Christian spirituality that a reader of spiritual classics ought to be aware of.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Muto, *Approaching the Sacred* (New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1973), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, “The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides”, 40-41.

<b>HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY</b>	
<b>Era</b>	<b>Nature of Spirituality</b>
The Patristic era	A theological spirituality
Byzantium	Apophatic spirituality
Early Western Medieval period	A monastic spirituality
Later Middle Ages and Renaissance	A developing individualism
Post-Reformation period	Unity in the Spirit in an age of fragmentation

Fig. 1. History of Christian Spirituality

*Source:* Broken Bay Institute course description for SP412: Studies in Historical Spirituality

Second, a person reading the spiritual classics must realize both the continuity of the Christian tradition, and its distinctive unfolding nature – it does not stay the same; it is not static.<sup>12</sup> The gulf of the centuries separating modern readers from ancient authors is bridgeable in some ways and not in others.<sup>13</sup> One's task of re-appropriation in reading the classics must

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

involve recognizing both that the classics are rooted in their historical moment, and to let that also be a catalyst for the discovery of one's own limited frame of reference.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, one needs to be aware of the difference in reading the spiritual classics from the point of view of a historian – or, as a believer reading the classics as devotional guides to “glimpse the glory of God and feel the healing touch of the Spirit”.<sup>15</sup> The historian holds to the integrity of the text and does not try to slough off or reinterpret material. By contrast, the believer may let some of the language slough off, or let some of it unfold in meaning.<sup>16</sup>

### **Appreciating the Nature of the Spiritual Writer's Work**

In order to grow spiritually from reading spiritual classics, a person needs to be cognizant with the nature of the spiritual writer's work.

To begin with, a spiritual writer “is a person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine Spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God, and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life”.<sup>17</sup> Their experience lies at the very depth of human spiritual consciousness – and is one of great intensity, power, and energy.<sup>18</sup> All other relationships count as nothing when compared with the relationship of the soul to God – involving the intense consciousness of God's love and presence.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>15</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, “The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides”, 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Second, and more specifically, the spiritual writer is sharing graced moments of divine intimacy.<sup>20</sup> He is describing the experience of God’s self-communication in the center of the soul<sup>21</sup> – therefore, he is writing words that speak to the heart; there is no clever rhetoric, no arid eloquence.<sup>22</sup> Ursula King adds, “the touch of God is most strongly felt deep within their own hearts.”<sup>23</sup> A reader must recognize that the limited vehicle of words is unable to record the full depth of the experience.<sup>24</sup> Writing in such a manner and in such depth is simultaneously an act of faith, an act of hope, and an act of charity.<sup>25</sup>

Third, the spiritual writer may evoke in a reader the wonder of admiration – that which awakens joy.<sup>26</sup> The reader can likewise be filled with gratitude in seeing through the writer’s eyes, for example, the beauty of nature and the blessing of God on all created things.<sup>27</sup> The sense of wonder, also called to mind by the writer, binds the reader to the whole and Holy.<sup>28</sup> King notes that “[spiritual writers] often perceive the presence of God throughout the world of nature and in all that is alive, leading to a transfiguration of the ordinary all around them”.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, a spiritual writer can be a master of paradox and so may induce in the reader the wonder of puzzlement.<sup>30</sup> The task facing the reader, then, is not to solve the paradox with their reasoning intellect but to live it experientially as the meaning of its mystery begins to

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<sup>20</sup> Muto, *Approaching the Sacred*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Muto, *Approaching the Sacred*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Muto, *Approaching the Sacred*, 31.

emerge.<sup>31</sup> A reader needs to understand that they can never plumb the inscrutability of God's wisdom – it will always fill the soul with wonder.<sup>32</sup> In other words, a person can spend long hours dwelling on a spiritual writer's words and never exhaust the range of experience they communicate about the Christian life.<sup>33</sup> And yet, without knowing how it happens, the text can shimmer with meaning.<sup>34</sup>

### **Comprehending the Task of the Spiritual Reader**

Spiritual reading, a foundational discipline of the spiritual life, gives one a frame of reference within which to meet God more personally.<sup>35</sup> However, in reading the spiritual classics, a person needs to prepare themselves as a spiritual reader.<sup>36</sup> They must be open to people, things, and events as manifestations of the Divine.<sup>37</sup> The priorities of spiritual living must permeate their day-to-day existence to keep awake the spirit within – or they can lose their deep interiority.<sup>38</sup> They need to live in utmost surrender to the will of God.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, in approaching the text to profit from it spiritually, a reader must recognize that ultimately Christ is the first spiritual master<sup>40</sup> – and it is God who calls and grants the gift of Himself to the soul ready to receive Him.<sup>41</sup> And then, in spiritual reading, the text is the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



master – the reader is the disciple.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the text conveys a way of life; it is a guide for one who is on the way – the reader, as a disciple, needs to be eager to assimilate.<sup>43</sup>

Thirdly, to assimilate the meaning of a spiritual work and to thereby profit spiritually, the task of a reader is to discipline themselves – so that their needs and strivings do not take over.<sup>44</sup> This translates into a desire to be receptive, to listen, to affirm the words, to follow with docility, to be led, and to be transformed.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in this process, a reader must also realize that the master may not have all the answers that they seek, but that he is able to witness to what it is like to live in the presence of the Lord.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, a person must quiet their analytical mind, surrender their problem-solving mentality, and begin to live in the wonder of not knowing, of not being there, but of being on the way.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, an attitude of wonder is also a way of disciplining oneself to be able to listen to the secret wisdom of the spiritual writer.<sup>48</sup>

### Reading with One's Heart

A reader needs to remember to read and hear the spiritual classics with their heart (as well as with their head) – “more grasped by the divine heartbeat that pulses through the hearts of our authors, less fixated on the particular manifestation of a divine/human love”.<sup>49</sup> Klug distinguishes between reading for *information* as opposed to reading for *formation* – and states

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, “The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides”, 46.

that the reading of the spiritual classics is for formation.<sup>50</sup> “We are not reading so much for intellectual growth as to open ourselves to the Spirit’s transforming power”.<sup>51</sup>

Second, in reading the classics of spirituality, a person discovers themselves in the communion of saints – and the fact that “the human heart, despite the centuries, has not changed; its fundamental rhythm is still the heartbeat of God”.<sup>52</sup> One identifies with the words: “readers hungry for God eagerly press their ears against those ancient beating hearts to detect the same Godward movements beating in their own hearts”.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, one can therefore read the spiritual classics with a freshness and openness of mind (but not simply uncritically) to hear the Word – the Word refracted through the lives and thoughts of faithful saints.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

Many people today are drawn to the spiritual classics for inspiration and transformation. They offer a message of wholeness and healing; of harmony, peace, and joy; also of immense struggles fought and won.<sup>55</sup> To discover the spiritual classics is an adventure – and their description of manifold experiences and examples can be empowering for one’s own life.<sup>56</sup> However, to benefit spiritually from them, readers should recognize the need for critical reading; understand the historical context; appreciate the nature of the spiritual writer’s

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<sup>50</sup> Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal*, 83.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Wright, “The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides”, 47.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> King, *Christian Mystics*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

work; comprehend the task of the spiritual reader; and read with one's heart to embrace the intended message.

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