

Can you teach spirituality?

Orientation, experiences and questions from a northwestern perspective

Revd. Dr. Michael Rohde

I Orientation – Basic Insights

1. Spirituality

Spirituality¹ is not a christian issue only and is a common², but cloudy term. It is necessary to distinguish between secular and christian spirituality.³ Spirituality in generally marks an attitude towards life that seeks for sense and meaning, because the seeker is convinced that there is something (an energy or awareness) or somebody (God(s) as personal being) beyond the own human being. Christian belief is rooted in the biblical tradition about God as Trinitarian being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who acted in historical incidents and with godly doings. Christian Spirituality is substantially focused on the personal relationship to the God of the Old and New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and is anchored in the *sola gratia extra nos*, the grace of Jesus Christ. Christian Spirituality includes the spiritual life and piety in a wide range of rites, acts and deeds.

1.1 Science and Spirituality

Especially in northwestern context there is a tense relation between *science* and *spirituality*. Christianity has never been only, but has always as well been a thinking religion.⁴ Science is leading its thoughts methodically comprehensible and reproducible, in a critical and distant manner and arguing logically, differentiating and reasoning. At the same time Spirituality seeks for forms of spiritual life and is creating forms to live out faith and to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Therefore Spirituality is a creation of the Holy Spirit, a movement inside a christian and a “going out” of a christian. Spirituality is a christian in existence. As Christian education teaches scientific views to the Bible, to church history, to systematic theology and reflects practical and mission theology there is often a gap to other dimensions of Christian spirituality.

1.2 Aspects of christian spirituality

Christian spirituality includes at least four dimensions⁵.

¹ This paper has been given at 7th forum of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools (CEBTS) and European Baptist Theological Teachers Conference (EBTTC) held from 9-13 July 2012 at Odessa Baptist Theological Seminary.

² Ulrich Köpf considers an increasing popularity of the term spirituality in the religious and theological literature of the 20th century. Cf. Köpf, Ulrich: Art. Spiritualität. I. Zum Begriff, in: RGG 4.Aufl. Tübingen 2004, 1589-1591, 1589. Christian Grethlein interprets the increased use as expression of the desire of all people of spiritual experiences in distance to traditionally used terms like piety or religion. Cf. Grethlein, Christian: Art. Spiritualität. VII. Praktisch-theologisch, in: RGG 4.Auflage, Tübingen 2004, 1596-1597.

³ Cf. Völkel, Arne: Moderne Formen der Spiritualität, in: Theologisches Gespräch 36/2012. Heft 2, Kassel 2012, 55-70, 55.

⁴ Cf. Härle, Wilfried: Dogmatik, Berlin/New York 1995, 15. Cf. as well C. H. Ratschow: Das Christentum als denkende Religion, in: C.H. Ratschow: Von den Wandlungen Gottes. Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie, Berlin/New York 1986, 3-23.

⁵ Cf. Völker, Formen 62 (see footnote 2).

The *rational* dimension seeks to deal with Christian belief in the intellectual, rational way. It is the supreme task of theology to believe in a reflected way and to express belief in words, speech and terms.

The *psychological* dimension of Christian spirituality touches the mental health, his self-perception and questions of guilt, shame and fear.

The *social and missional* dimension of Christian spirituality includes the relationships of people and their relationship to the Trinitarian God. Christian belief seeks the shalom of other people and includes salvation in political, economical and ecological aspects.

The *personal* dimension of Christian spirituality reaches the human self-awareness *coram deo* and the perception of God in relationship to myself.

There are at least four dimensions of Christian spirituality intensifying the raised question: Can you teach spirituality?

Before I give some examples of difficulties and challenges, I will remind you about some biblical insights. This manner is not postmodern, because if you trust postmodern Christianity the “great stories” came to an end. But a view to the way of teaching in biblical times will show us, that our question is neither modern nor postmodern, is just human in all times of Christian education.

2. Biblical Aspects

2.1 The daily life experience teaches

The wisdom of Old and New Testament is an international phenomenon, that raises insight not by revelation but by experience of life and observation. Wisdom is not in opposition to knowledge or science, but the oriental style of understanding wisdom is to link theory and practice together. Wisdom is the skill to conduct your life and to gain the power of judgment in all moments of life.⁶ The wisdom teacher observes for example the “field of the slothful” and the “vineyard of the man void of understanding” (Proverbs 24:30-34), discovers thorns and nettles and a broken stone wall, therefore he concludes how to achieve poverty easily. Observation of daily life experience teaches the wise man. In many cases the observations of nature become parables of life. The wise questions if flag grow without water (Job 8:11.13) and compares this with a human who loses contact to the living God. Daily life teaches and wisdom is true know-how to manage life by wisdom.

2.2 Jesus teaches

Jesus from Nazareth is the great teacher⁷, he teaches by talks and actions. His disciples are learning by observation and questioning. The first followers of Christ could look over his shoulder to learn. For the story of Luke 10:38-42 Mary sat at Jesus feet and heard his words and for the moment, this has

⁶ Cf. Kaiser, Otto: Der Gott des Alten Testaments. Theologie des Alten Testaments. Teil 1: Grundlegung, Göttingen 1993, 264. „Ein Mensch verdient das Prädikat, weise zu sein, erst dann, wenn er sich als den kritischen eigenen oder fremden Lebenssituationen mit Rat und Tat gewachsen erweist. In diesem Sinne nennen auch wir einen Menschen weise, wenn er den Schein durchschaut, sich nicht durch Leidenschaft oder Parteilichkeit verblenden lässt und daher in der Lage ist, in überlegener Weise situationsgerecht zu raten oder zu handeln.“

⁷ Cf. Theissen, Gerd/Merz, Annette: Der historische Jesus, Göttingen 2. Aufl. 1997. Theissen and Merz distinguish Jesus as poet of the parables (§11) and Jesus as teacher of ethics (§ 12).

been the best place to be and what has been needful. The teaching of Jesus is mostly with simple words and parables. Therefore the spirituality is affected by experiences in agrarian life and life of fisher-men and not of philosophers.

2.3 Thinking and reflection teaches (Paul)

All the letters of apostle Paul are soaked of high level education of Pauls and arguing in a discursive way.⁸ The spirituality of Paul and his letters is provoking intellectually and reflective. That Christianity is a thinking religion, becomes obvious with the teachings of the New Testament. To think (*logizomai*) is a typical expression for Paul to confess his belief: Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. (Rom 3:28).

2.4 Rites and feasts teach

Old and New Testament have in common that they establish and recommend rites and feasts to express belief to the sovereign God. The originally agrarian feasts of the Levante, became in the tradition of the Old Testament a ritual lecture about their own history, mainly of the Exodus.⁹ The Baptism and Lords Supper were linked to rites of their time of ritual washings and meals, but were revealed as sacraments of the new life in Christ. Rites of Judaism and Christianity teach in a holistic way, what it means to be somebody of the chosen people of God. All dimensions of spirituality are linked together with the sacraments: The rational argument of what is e.g. Lord's Supper about, the psychological dimension to be liberated from guilt, the social dimension to share food and to respect others ("unworthy" eating and drinking like 1Cor 11:27), the personal dimension to be aware who man is *coram deo* (as reconciled person).

II Challenges and Questions

If I personally look on the challenges of „teaching spirituality in a northwestern context“ there are four dimensions I would like to focus on. They all refer to spirituality in the context of theological education or Christian education of the local church to tackle the question: Can you teach spirituality and if you could, how can you?

1. Spirituality and Education

Even the countries of north-west Europe are highly educated and reach high levels of literacy, we can observe a rising skepticism about dogmata and institutions. Main interest to evaluate something is quite often, not how somebody *argued*, but how it *feels*. Christian Spirituality at local church level is losing the manner of discussion, quarrelling and arguing. The typical culture of a Baptist Church is not any more to have a lively Bible Class or Sunday School for Adults, to read the memorandum for peace

⁸ Cf. Stuhlmacher, Peter: Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Grundlegung. Von Jesus zu Paulus, Bd.1, Göttingen 2.Aufl 1997, 221-392, 253. Especially the teaching of Paul about the law is not systematically well ordered, but soaked with many different traditions gained from the Old Testament, Jesus and the first Christian believers.

⁹ Cg. Berlejung, Angelika: Heilige Zeiten. Ein Forschungsbericht, JBTh 18 (2003), 3-61. Berlejung, Angelika: Exkurs A. Feste, in: Jan Christian Gertz (Ed.): Grundinformation Altes Testament, 4.Auflage Göttingen 2010, 78-81.

or any longer reasoning paper about a controversial topics, but to meet and share life. Although the necessity to debate about ethical, political, ecological, social and economical questions is increasing, the number of circles and people who conduct lively discussion are decreasing. Although the number of possibilities for any position on the market of positions is increasing and the question are getting bigger and bigger, the competence to reflect Christian belief and argue for it, is decreasing. Therefore Churches – not only Baptist Churches for sure – are losing weight in public affairs.

Surely, on a scientific level, the argument is still alive, but the students we receive, are mainly approaching life and Christian spirituality not with a rational attitude. Therefore the reflection and arguments of Paul and all biblical and systematical tradition, which argues like this, is losing its effectiveness and influence on Christian life, preaching, teaching, etc.

We are challenged as theological teachers, because the “average” student of today must learn first that thinking is necessary and can be fruitful for Christian spirituality and reflection is not in opposition to faith. Especially the historical way of interpretation of the Bible and its sources is expanding the gap between yesterday and today. The way of historical exegeses that uncovers that the world of the Bible is *first of* all strange and foreign and that every theologian needs to discover this strangeness of the ancient world makes the effort of academic studies of theology quite challenging.

How can theological education reach a new generation with the rational dimension of theology/christianity without boring or losing them?

2. Spirituality and feelings (psyche)

The main expectation to church seems to be to create great feelings. Emotions are overwhelming important for new and old media impulses, and church is challenged to evoke such feelings with rites, services and atmospheric elements. Songs became highly emotionally (romantic). Church ceremonies like wedding, funeral, blessing or events are expected to meet the feelings of all participants in a deeply way. Fellowship reaches the level of ecstatic and replaces arguments and rational dimensions.

How can theological education include the emotional dimension of spirituality without losing their deepness and awareness?

3. Spirituality and Experience

If observation and life experience is one of the master of teaching spirituality we are challenged at the Seminaries and Colleges, because a lot of students are young of age and young of experiences. Most of them are well comforted and born and raised quite petted or spoiled. Their heart is full of passion to serve the Lord, but sometimes, they did never experience suffering or sorrow, and cannot adapt to these situation by their own experiences. Therefore the relation between feelings, experiences and intellectual approach to faith is mostly unbalanced.

How can theological education and church life open up possibilities to experience different situation of life and life-style for young adults?

4. Spirituality and convivence

Some areas of the challenges to improve theological education today tackled Michael Kißkalt 2010 at CEBTS. He recommended for theological education in the light of the concept of convivence:

“1. Theological education, in the light of convivence, will not only broach the issue of sinfulness of the world, but also the issue of the presence of God in the world.

2. Already during theological education, you offer space and time for students to develop their own identity process. If you are aware of your own faith processes, later, in the pastoral and missionary ministry, you might concede these processes also to other people.

3. Theological education should practice convivence in and alongside its courses. It should always be clear, that the professors are also learners, and the students also teachers.

4. In order to learn to bring together convictional identity and life in its diversity, theological seminaries might develop structures and space where students and their theological teachers can share their lives with each other in addition to the theological content.”¹⁰

5. Spirituality und fears

Christian spirituality can help to overcome existential, mental, religious and social fears.¹¹

If Christian Spirituality is guided by the reformatory principle *solus christus* the believer can discover, that in the midst of seeking infinity, but realizing limitation Christ is close in the midst of fear.

If Christian Spirituality is guided by the reformatory principle *sola gratia* the believer can discover, that the fear to burn-out or to fail life is covered by the grace of God - you need to life with any mental fraction.

If the skepticism about dogmata is increasing, the basis of *sola fide* reminds us, that Christian spirituality includes the adventure of yours own decision and spiritual self-reliance as a follower of Jesus Christ. Not tradition (even not Baptist tradition) is meeting the desire of spirituality, but the openness to be attracted to faith by Gods love.

Anybody wants to belong to a group and at the same time human wants to be allowed to be different to others. A common language, songs and rites are strengthening the commitment of a group. But the Holy Scripture is a source to go beyond this horizon, because Christian spirituality leads to love those who not love you, to bridge gaps between humans, to loose social fears.

How can we rediscover the reformatory principles to meet the fears of temporary Christians in the midst of changing society?

¹⁰ Kisskalt, Michael: Mission as Convivence – Life Sharing and Mutual Learning in Mission. Inspirations from German missiology (JEBTS 2011), 5-14, 14.

¹¹ Cf. Völkel, Formen 68-70 (see footnote 2).

III Can you teach spirituality?

Yes and no. Yes, you can teach – in the pattern of the Bible: Followers of Christ are taught through experience and observation, through lectures, through arguments, through rites and feasts.

To follow these patterns we will need to continuously reflect the relation between science and spirituality and the four and more dimensions of spirituality and the (post)modern challenges to include in our theological education the intellect, feelings, experiences and fears. The best way to meet these needs will be alongside the concept of convivence as a strong expression of God's love to another by living and sharing life, experience and knowledge together.

No, you cannot teach spirituality as you can teach mathematics.

You can practice, you can encourage, you can reflect. The teacher will be – unwillingly or consciously - a model – and at the same time, every teacher is still a student in Christ's school. The reason that it is in a way impossible to "teach" spirituality, is hidden in the secret of spiritual growth: It is the work of the Holy Spirit and not a question of training only. But without training, the Holy Spirit will not fulfill what we begun.

Revd. Dr. theol. Michael Rohde

Prof. Dr. Michael Rohde,

Theological Seminary Elstal (Fachhochschule / scientific school), Germany,

Johann-Gerhard-Oncken-Str. 7, 14641 Wustermark (Germany)