

**Christian
Spirituality 3.
Biblical Images and
Christian Spirituality**

Introduction

What is Christian Spirituality?

Christianity Spirituality is the *quest* for a *fulfilled* and *authentic* life, that involves

- taking the beliefs and values of Christianity
- and weaving them into the fabric of our lives
- so that they "animate," provide the "breath" and "spirit" and "fire" for our lives

Introduction

Biblically derived images that we will consider:

- **The Feast**
- **The Journey**
- **Exile**
- **Struggle**
- **Purification**
- **The Desert**
- **Ascent**
- **Darkness and Light**
- **Silence**

The Feast

Biblical Images

Jesus compared Kingdom of God to a great banquet in celebration of marriage (Luke 14:15-24)

Father of Prodigal son threw a feast when the Prodigal son returned (Luke 15:11-24)

The Feast

Use in Spirituality

Themes in the image of a feast

- abundance of food and drink to satisfy hunger
- invitation. Those invited to feast are wanted and are welcome
- celebration, rejoicing. Marks a great occasion, such as a wedding

The Feast

Use in Spirituality

The human hunger for God and the Feast to come

Augustine: “you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”

The Feast

Use in Spirituality

Blaise Pascal (1623-62) on the inner human emptiness due to the absence of God:

What else does this longing and helplessness proclaim, but that there was once in each person a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? We try to fill this in vain with everything around us, seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are there. Yet none can change things, because this infinite abyss can only be filled with something that is infinite and unchanging – in other words, by God himself. God alone is our true good.

The Feast

Use in Spirituality

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963):

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited

The Journey

Biblical Images

Abraham's journey to Canaan

The wandering of the Israelites in the desert
for 40 years before coming to the
promised land

The return of the people to Jerusalem after
exile in Babylon in 586 B.C.

Paul's great missionary journeys

The Journey

Biblical Images

Early Christians “followers of the way” (e.g. Acts 9:2, 24:14). Christian life a journey of deliverance from bondage to sin before arriving in the heavenly city

Letters: Christian life like a race, arduous journey under pressure, with a crown at the end (Galatians 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:7; Hebrews 12:1-2)

The Journey

Use in Spirituality

Insights for spirituality in the image of Christian life as a Journey:

- we frequently use “maps” on a journey to help us on the way. Our “maps” in the Journey of our lives are the shared experience of others who have made that Journey
- Anticipating our arrival and envisioning the New Jerusalem can provide encouragement on the way
- Christian Journey is not merely individual pilgrimage, but a corporate journey in which we can offer each other mutual support

The Journey

Use in Spirituality

New Testament models of athlete and soldiers highlight importance of discipline in Christian Life: **Asceticism** (Greek *askesis* “discipline”)

Self-discipline, training a means of eliminating barriers to spiritual growth, so we reach our goal of arriving safely in our heavenly homeland

The Journey

Use in Spirituality

Works of Spirituality with the theme of journeying:

- Dante (1265-1321) Divine Comedy:
journey from the darkness of the woods to encounter with God in a beatific vision
- John Bunyan (1628-88): Pilgrim's Progress. Story of Christian's journey from the "City of Destruction" to "the Heavenly City"

Exile

Biblical Images

Jan. 586 BC: Babylon lay siege to the
Jerusalem

Jul. 586 BC: broke through the walls of
Jerusalem

- army routed
- chief building destroyed
- temple furnishings taken to Babylon as
booty
- people deported to Babylon to live in
exile

Exile

Biblical Images

Interpreted as:

- judgment for lapses into pagan religious beliefs
- period of repentance and renewal

Exile

Use in Spirituality

We are “citizens of heaven” (Paul), and our present life a period of exile from the heavenly Jerusalem where we belong
Peter Abelard (1079-1142):

**Now, in the meanwhile, with hearts
raised on high
We for that country must yearn and
must sigh
Seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,
Through our long exile on Babylon’s
strand**

Exile

Use in Spirituality

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) “Prayer
to Christ”

**All this I hold with unwavering faith
And weep over the hardship of exile.
Hoping in the sole consolation of your
coming
Ardently longing for the glorious
contemplation of your face**

The Struggle

Biblical Images

Paul: “putting on the full armor of God” to protect against spiritual attack (Ephesians 6:10-18)

Christians compared to soldiers in 2 Tim. 2:3 who need self-discipline to persevere in the struggles ahead

Jacob’s struggle with unidentified man (God) by the River Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32)

The Struggle

Use in Spirituality

Contexts in which the image of Christian life as a struggle has been used in spirituality:

- 1. external struggle against those hostile to Christianity
- 2. internal struggle against temptation
- 3. a struggle with God

The Struggle Use in Spirituality

Internal Struggle Against Temptation:

- *Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila (1515-82). Invites readers to:
 - look into their souls
 - understand themselves
 - combat the sins which they find
- *Spiritual Combat (Combattimento Spirituale)* 1589, by Lorenzo Scupoli.
Went through 250 editions 1589-1750
- Puritan Spirituality. John Owen (1616-83):
“On the Mortification of Sin in Believers”

The Struggle Use in Spirituality

Struggle with God:

Thomas Aquinas; John Wesley: prayer a
struggle with God, trying to gain insights
into God's will and purpose

Purification

Biblical Images

Day of Atonement ritual (Leviticus 16):
preparation required for high priest
before entering into the presence of God
Psalm 51: theme of “cleansing from sin:”

**Wash away all my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. . .
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be
clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than
snow.**

Purification

Biblical Images

Letter to the Hebrews:

- Christ the perfect sacrifice who takes away the stain of sin (Hebrews 4:14-16)
- Christ's death "sprinkles the hearts" of believers, "cleanses guilty consciences" (Hebrews 10:22)
- water of baptism described as symbol of the cleansing resulting from Christ's death on the cross

Revelation:

Cleansing as being "washed in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14)

Purification

Use in Spirituality

Sin is like contamination or stain within us, and a goal of our life is to purify and cleanse ourselves through discipline and the grace of God

Sin has distorted the “image and likeness of God” within us

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) Sermon on the Song of Songs: **“We are repairing the image of God within us, and the way is being prepared, by the grace of God, for the retrieval of that honor which we once possessed, but which we forfeited on account of sin”**

Purification

Use in Spirituality

Hugh of Balma (13th Century) and the 3
“ways” or “paths” in Christian
spirituality

- 1. “purgative way” *via purgative*.
Purgation of the soul from sin
- 2. “way of illumination” *via illuminativa*.
Soul enlightened by rays of divine
wisdom through meditation on Scripture
and prayer
- 3. “way of union” *via unitiva*. Soul united
with God

The Desert

Biblical Images

Wandering of Israelites in the desert before coming to the promised land

Jeremiah and Hosea: desert as a place for purification and renewal of Israel

Elijah and John the Baptist: desert a place of prayer and purification

Jesus withdrew into the wilderness for 40 days after his baptism

The Desert

Use in Spirituality

The desert is a lonely place. The individual is alone with God, able to reflect, mediate, pray without distraction

Has been taken both literally and allegorically in Christian spirituality

Literally:

- Antony of Egypt (251-356): founded a community in the desert, away from the world
- Carmelites: hermits on Mount Carmel. Later moved to Europe. Retreats to isolated centers recreated the solitude of Mount Carmel

The Desert

Use in Spirituality

Allegorically

- Origen: A Christian's life is a wandering in the desert before we finally cross the Jordan into the promised land
- the manna in the desert sometimes seen as God's providing spiritual nourishment on our journeys (abbott Rupert of Deutz (1075-1130))

Ascent

Biblical Images

Moses ascended Sinai to receive the
Commandments

Jesus ascended a mountain to be
transfigured

Jacob dreams of a ladder between heaven
and earth (Genesis 28:12)

Idea of ascent:

- draw closer to God
- transcendence from transitory human
world to heaven

Ascent

Use in Spirituality

Our Christian life involves ascent, progressive spiritual growth bringing us closer to God and to the transcendence of heaven

- Bonaventure (1217-74): contemplation a means of ascent to God. Journey up the mountain begins with love Christ, sustained by meditation on Christ crucified
- St. John of the Cross (1542-91): Ascent of Mount Carmel. Spirituality involves progressive growth that brings us closer to God

Ascent

Use in Spirituality

Dante: in *Divine Comedy* climbs Mount Purgatory to get closer to God

Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* (1946): writes of his own spiritual growth in terms of 7 mountains

Darkness and Light

Biblical Images

God described in images of *illumination*:

- Genesis: God creates light, vanquishing the darkness (chaos and confusion)
- God presence and power a great light (Isaiah 9:2): the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light
- Jesus is “the light of the world” who overcomes darkness (John 8:12)

Darkness and Light

Biblical Images

God sometimes associated with images of
darkness

- Moses approaches God through darkness and cloud
- Paul: we are “seeing through a glass darkly”

Darkness and Light

Use in Spirituality

Themes of “darkness” in Christian Spirituality:

- an image of doubt. We are unable to “see” properly and understand what is going on
- a symbol of sin. Sin is a barrier to God, blinding us to God
- a symbol of divine unknowability. Our limited minds cannot full comprehend the creator, and so we now live in a “divine night” in which God is ultimately unknowable (Gregory of Nyssa, 330-395, Gregory of Nazianzus 329-89)

Darkness and Light

Use in Spirituality

Cloud of Unknowing (perhaps by Walter Hilton, 1343-96): a cloud of unknowing lies between God and the believer, so we can never see, understand, or experience God clearly. Our lives are a dark road of unknowing and inner suffering with only occasional moments of rapture in partial and temporary glimpses of God

Darkness and Light

Use in Spirituality

John of the Cross (1542-91) “dark night of the soul:” the way the soul is stripped of self-assurance to open a path to a closer relationship to God

- active aspect of the night: through believer’s voluntary self-discipline and submission
- passive aspect of the night: in the believer’s act of contemplation, God becomes active and leads the believer to new insights

Silence

Biblical Images

Habakkuk: the earth should be silent in the presence of God in the temple
(Habakkuk 2:20)

Job reduced to silence at the end, aware of his foolishness in the sight of God (Job 40:1-3)

Revelation 8:1: silence in heaven from human awe in the presence of God

Silence

Use in Spirituality

Human words can never articulate the full wonder of God, and the only appropriate response when confronted with that wonder is silence

Silence liberates the mind and imagination to focus on God

- Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God”

Silence

Use in Spirituality

Arthur Michael Ramsey (1904-88), Archbishop of
Canterbury

“Silence enable us to be aware of God, to let mind and imagination dwell upon his truth, to let prayer to be listening before it is talking, and to discover our own selves in a way that is not always possible when we are making or listening to noise. There comes sometimes an inner silence in which the soul discovers itself in a new dimension of energy and peace, a dimension which the restless life can miss. . . Into the Christian’s use of silence there may flow the wonder of God the creator, the recollection of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the recalling of scenes in his life, often a passage of the Bible, the glories of nature in which the finger of God is present, gratitude for personal blessings or the words of poets who tell of wonder and beauty”

Silence

Use in Spirituality

Hesychasm (*hesychia*: Greek for silence or stillness)

- movement in Eastern Christianity (8th century and after) in which the believer tries to achieve isolation from all distractions to focus on God by repeating the *Jesus Prayer*: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”

References

Christian Spirituality. An Introduction.

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(Chapter 5: Biblical Images and
Spirituality)