CURRENT FORMS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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“Following intuitions in the quest for fullness of life”—this heuristic definition of spirituality that I gave in the introduction of this publication is my starting point for a survey of current forms of Christian spirituality in Western societies. My chapter first describes Christian trends in following intuitions that lead to fullness of life. At present we see great diversity in Christian spirituality, but it is likely that future Christian spirituality will incline more toward homogeneous and traditional forms. My contribution gives an inventory of some common practices in Christian spirituality. These include devotional, creative, reflective, physical, virtuous and guidance practices. I then briefly outline the various contexts of Christian spirituality at the micro, meso and macro levels where the practices are performed. Next I consider the disciplines involved and argue that we need to have more cooperation between humanities and other academic disciplines to broaden our understanding of Christian spirituality. My chapter concludes with a proposal for a three-dimensional model that would enable us to reflect on the literature about present-day spiritualities in Western Christianity.

1. Christian Trends in Following Intuitions for Achieving Fullness of Life

Christians believe that the power that brings us fullness, richness and depth lies beyond us in external sources. They do not reach fullness through their own human strength but through the grace of God. This does not mean, however, that Christians passively accept their fate. They believe they can cooperate with divine grace by opening themselves up to God’s presence and preparing themselves for receiving divine gifts. What is more, they immerse themselves in divine nearness. So on the one hand they strive for a pure heart that is receptive to God’s closeness and on the other they are

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1. See the introduction of this study.
2. See the introduction of this study.
consciously enraptured by the force of divine attraction and are absorbed into union with the divine. This implies that following an intuition that leads to fullness of life is both an active and a passive path in Christian spirituality. This applied to past forms of Christian spirituality and still applies to present forms.

However, in current Christianity there seems to be a shift in intuitions that can lead to fullness of life. Living in relative wealthy, liberal and democratic countries, Western Christians are able to participate in a wide range of constructions that may lead to fulfilment, and are not restricted to the interpretations given by church authorities. It is well established that Christians, like other members of Western societies, embrace their freedom and select their own goals.\(^3\) Paul Zulehner’s study of Germany, Austria and Switzerland differentiates between traditional Christians (23 percent of the total population) and what he calls syn-Christians (18 percent of the total population), Christians who remain under the umbrella of Christianity but are in fact constructing a more open spirituality. Whereas traditional Christian spirituality is mostly moderate, syn-Christians are highly spiritual\(^4\) and, in comparison with traditional Christians, less organized. But both traditional and syn-Christians have an influence. Traditional Christians have strong networks and financial, material and personal capacities, while syn-Christians have great vitality, are highly flexible and are able to transform their churches by introducing new elements.\(^5\) When comparing these two groups, however, the decisive factor is age: young people up to the age of 29 are more likely to affiliate with traditional Christianity (20 percent of that age group) than with syn-Christians (7 percent of that age group), and this trend seems to be quite powerful. So although we do see great diversity in Christian spirituality today, it is likely that Christian spirituality will tend toward more homogeneous and traditional forms in the future.

Against this background I now describe some spiritual practices in current Christianity—some of them typical of traditional Christian spirituality, others of syn-Christian spirituality.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) That is to say, spirituality is much more crucial in the personality of Syn-Christians. See also the introduction of this study.
