

EXPLORING
Christian Spirituality

*Essays in Honor of
Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*

Edited by
Bruce H. Lescher
Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM



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INTRODUCTION

Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM

In recent years Christian spirituality has emerged as a rich and dynamic player among the academic disciplines, claiming as its focus the critical exploration of religious experience in its many facets. Sandra M. Schneiders commands respect as one of the most significant and influential figures in the emergence of the study of Christian spirituality. This volume has two purposes. It commemorates Schneiders's contributions to the foundation and maturing of this vital young discipline. And it offers its own contribution to the development of the discipline through a collection of essays that push the boundaries of the discipline. Happily, these two purposes coincide. How appropriate to honor Schneiders's foundational contributions by building on her foundations as these nine authors do in this collection.

SCHNEIDERS'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DISCIPLINE OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Three main contributions to the discipline of Christian spirituality emerge from Sandra Schneiders's scholarly pursuits: the doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union, her writings on defining the field, and her involvement in the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. She might well be honored for her contributions in just one of these areas, but her involvement in all three renders her achievements all the more remarkable.

Doctoral Program at the Graduate Theological Union

Schneiders arrived at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, a member school of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), in January 1976. At that time interest in spirituality was widespread among several GTU faculty members as well as some at the University of California Berkeley (UCB). Interested GTU faculty included Michael Buckley, James Empereur, Daniel O'Hanlon, Mary Ann Donovan, Donald Gelpi, and William Fulco of the Jesuit School; Joseph Chinnici, Anita Caspary, and James Liguri of the Franciscan School; William Herzog and Eldon Ernst of the American Baptist Seminary of the West; Wilhelm Wuellner and Durwood Foster of the Pacific School of Religion, Max Pearse and Massey Shepherd of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific; Antoninus Wall of the Dominican School; and Robert Goeser of the Pacific Lutheran School of Theology. Interested UCB faculty included William Bouwsma and William Slottman (history), Robert Bellah (sociology), and Mark Juergensmeyer and Lewis Lancaster (religious studies). Schneiders served as a catalyst to bring these faculty members together and to launch a doctoral program in Christian spirituality under the disciplinary umbrella of history of religions. The doctoral council of the GTU approved this move on May 5, 1976, and Schneiders served as the first program facilitator.¹ In 1992 Christian spirituality became a separate area of study within the GTU, with its own distinct faculty and protocol.

While Schneiders's scholarship would become a major influence in the field, she herself was influenced by the academic environment in which she taught and did research. In an interview with the editors of this volume on November 5, 2004, she noted that her own approach to the discipline evolved out of a need to address the requirements of a doctoral program at the GTU. For example, one of the first questions with which the faculty struggled was where to locate Christian spirituality within the academic areas of the GTU. Possible candidates included systematic or moral theology, but Schneiders argued that it be located within a phenomenological area, the history of religions. Thus, from the

beginning, she sought to articulate spirituality's independence, as a study of lived experience, from the traditional divisions of theology. Further, because the doctoral program in Christian spirituality was originally located within the history of religions, its protocol had to address the requirements of that area. As a result, the study of foundational texts (in this case, the Bible) and the historical development of a tradition (in this case, the history of Christian spirituality) became the two constitutive disciplines in Schneiders's explanation of spirituality, and they have been embedded in the GTU doctoral program from its outset.

Launching the doctoral program in Christian spirituality constituted a major contribution to the academic discipline. The first generation of scholars in Christian spirituality were trained in other disciplines, such as biblical studies, systemic theology, or history of theology. Now, a new generation of scholars could be trained in Christian spirituality as a field in its own right. Prof. Schneiders has directed many of the dissertations completed in the GTU program and mentored several graduates into faculty positions in other institutions.

The ecumenical and interfaith context of the GTU meant that the discipline would develop in ways that differed from other programs, such as those at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the Institut Catholique in Paris, and Fordham University in New York. For example, in addition to the two constitutive disciplines of Bible and history of Christian spirituality, the GTU curriculum requires the study of a spirituality other than Christian as a way of grounding the study of Christian spirituality in a wider interfaith context.

Writings Defining the Field

One of the first challenges facing this new field of Christian spirituality was how to define itself. What was its object of study? Its methodology? Writing in 1986, Schneiders noted that "spirituality is, in a sense, a phenomenon which has not been defined, analyzed, or categorized to anyone's satisfaction."² More than a decade later, in 1998, she observed: "In the space of a couple of decades a new discipline has emerged. Spirituality is by no means a full-grown participant in the academy. Neither its self-definition

nor its relationships with other disciplines is clearly established.”³ As this volume will demonstrate, the effort to delineate this discipline, perhaps no longer emergent but still in its youth, continues today.

As the new discipline took root, Prof. Schneiders wrote several seminal articles setting out her vision of its contours. The bibliography (Part III) of this volume demonstrates the depth and breadth of her scholarship to date in this area. Here we will summarize her writing in broad themes; the essays that follow will delve more deeply into various facets of her work. For each of these themes Schneiders has advanced the conversation among scholars by articulating her position with great clarity. While some of her peers have disagreed with her conclusions, they are nonetheless indebted to her spirited engagement in advancing the conversation.

Prof. Schneiders’s writings about the academic discipline of Christian spirituality fall into five broad areas. First, she has consistently argued that spirituality is an academic discipline in its own right, not a subdiscipline within theology. Traditionally, spiritual theology, with its branches of ascetical and mystical theology, was a subdivision of moral theology. Schneiders has articulated a position that spirituality, as the study of lived religious experience, precedes theology, which is a second-level reflection on experience. Theology, as a reflective discipline, “has the ability and the responsibility to criticize spirituality,” to judge its adequacy as an expression of the Christian tradition.⁴

Second, an academic discipline needs to define its object of study. What is it that spirituality studies? Schneiders has delineated spirituality’s object as “the spiritual life as experience.”⁵ Spirituality seeks to understand lived experience “as it actually occurs, as it actually transforms its subject toward fullness of life in Christ, that is, toward self-transcending life-integration within the Christian community of faith.”⁶ Because of this focus on experience, Schneiders, following Paul Ricoeur, argues that spirituality studies the individual

precisely as an individual. Spirituality is characteristically involved in the study of individuals: texts, persons,

particular spiritual traditions such as Benedictinism, elements of spiritual experience such as discernment, interrelations of factors in particular situations such as the mutual relation of prayer and social commitment, concrete processes such as spiritual direction.⁷

Third, an academic discipline also needs to delineate the method or methods by which it studies its object. Schneiders's contribution here is to argue for a hermeneutic approach to spirituality. This is to say, a given study of lived religious experience is likely to include three phases: description of the experience being investigated, analysis leading to explanation and evaluation, and finally appropriation (what this experience means to us today).⁸

Fourth, while arguing for a hermeneutical approach to spirituality, Schneiders also contends that spirituality is a "field-encompassing field."⁹ It does not have one methodology; rather, it employs whatever methodologies are relevant to understanding the topic being researched. Lived religious experience can be studied from the viewpoint of many disciplines. Nearly any study would include biblical studies and the history of spirituality, but other disciplines could be involved as well: theology, psychology, sociology, literary criticism, artistic theory, architecture, ecology, and so on. The choice of methodology depends upon the topic being studied.

Finally, Schneiders posits that the discipline of spirituality has a triple finality: research into religious experience adding to cumulative knowledge, assisting the researcher's own spiritual life, and assisting in the lives of other people.¹⁰ Within the academy this threefold goal raises a tangle of issues around the self-implication of the researcher. Schneiders has courageously explored these areas and articulated a position that honors both the integrity of research and the self-involvement of scholars in their research. She has also posited differing ends between the study of spirituality for research (academia) and for purposes of training people in a spiritual tradition (formation), a move that further clarifies the distinct role of the academic discipline of Christian spirituality.

The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality

Prof. Schneiders's third contribution stems from her involvement in the founding and organizing of the Society for the study of Christian Spirituality. The founding of the Society in 1992 was a major step in the development of the discipline, because it gave scholars a forum to discuss issues affecting their rapidly developing field and established an organ through which their research could be published. The society quickly became a major locus for advances in the field.

Under the leadership of Prof. Bradley Hanson of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) sponsored a Consultation in Christian Spirituality in 1982–83 and a Seminar on Modern Christian Spirituality, 1984–88.¹¹ Hanson and other colleagues were seeking ways to continue the conversation but were not successful in getting further program units within the AAR. At the AAR's 1991 annual meeting in Kansas City, these scholars decided to form an affiliated society that would meet immediately prior to the AAR sessions. Schneiders was involved in these initial discussions, and she and Prof. Hanson began recruiting others. The AAR approved the group's application to become an affiliated society. A steering committee consisting of Bradley Hanson, Sandra Schneiders, Douglas Burton-Christie, Mary Elizabeth Moore, and Don Saliers was appointed, and the society held its first meeting in San Francisco in 1992. From these small beginnings the society now has a membership of 450 members.

Schneiders served on the steering committee and also on the first governing board. She recruited Douglas Burton-Christie to be editor of the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, which began publication in 1993. Burton-Christie developed the *Bulletin* into an attractive and quality publication that came to be widely respected in academic circles.¹² Schneiders was elected president of the society in 1996 and delivered the presidential address in November 1997. She was also instrumental in the evolution of the *Bulletin* into a refereed journal, entitled *Spiritus*, which began publication in 2001 under the auspices of Johns Hopkins University Press. She continues to serve on the editorial board of *Spiritus*. This refereed journal

provides a forum for a wide range of scholars to publish within the discipline of Christian spirituality.

ADVANCING THE CONVERSATION

In light of Schneiders's influence on the formation of the discipline, it seems most appropriate to honor her contributions to the field by continuing to advance the study of Christian spirituality, addressing issues that emerge at present at the "edges" of the discipline. At these borders lie significant questions of content and method that will set the course of the discipline for the next decade; here matters are being debated and the field is being refined as it is explored. In this volume colleagues and students of Dr. Schneiders and other collaborators in the academic discipline of Christian spirituality articulate issues for the field from their various disciplinary and methodological perspectives. The focus is not so much on what these disciplines and methods say about Christian spirituality as an academic discipline, but on how scholars working in the field fruitfully *employ* them in pursuing the academic study of Christian spirituality itself.

Methodological Essays

The volume begins, as is appropriate for a new discipline, with three essays that examine issues of methodology. From the perspective of a historical theologian, Philip Sheldrake argues that spirituality is—and must remain—a provocative presence within theology, as well as a distinct discipline, but that spirituality may very well be the key to the contemporary theological problematic. Spirituality's role, claims Sheldrake, is to remind theology not to separate itself from the wisdom found in lived experience and practice, even as the discipline of spirituality itself must move more fully into these very commitments that constitute its self-identity.

We have noted Schneiders's use of the phrase "field-encompassing field" to describe the academic discipline of Christian spirituality. That is to say, scholars of spirituality employ other disciplines as they pursue their distinctive work. From her vantage

point as a scholar of “interdisciplinarity,” Judith Berling addresses the claim that Christian spirituality is inherently interdisciplinary. She pushes beyond the structural aspects of interdisciplinarity to probe precisely how the scholar goes about interdisciplinary scholarship. As Berling proceeds, she raises questions about constitutive and problematic disciplines (as Schneiders defines these terms) and about how broadly or narrowly the discipline defines its boundaries, issues that the developing discipline is now in a position to address.

The person of the scholar is inevitably and overtly drawn into the study of Christian spirituality—the discipline is inherently self-implicating. Not only is the researcher’s own experience relevant to the research project, but what the researcher studies implicates the researcher. Belden Lane probes this controversial aspect of the discipline, inquiring precisely how the scholar’s self is both effectively and ineffectively exercised in the practice of spirituality as a critical discipline. He illustrates helpful and problematic examples of authorial presence in classical texts, at the same time modeling appropriate authorial presence in contemporary scholarship in Christian spirituality. The point, he reminds us, is not, after all, about ourselves.

Essays at the Edges of the Discipline

The remaining essays serve as “reports from the field.” From their various content and disciplinary perspectives, six scholars report on their work at the edges of the discipline. New Testament scholar John Donahue traces the development of biblical spirituality, particularly in Sandra Schneiders’s work. He begins with the wider context in the discipline of spirituality, summarizing Schneiders’s understanding of spirituality and the academic discipline that critically studies the phenomenon of spirituality, as well as the developments within the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II in which biblical spirituality developed. He concludes with remarks on the evolution of Christian spirituality from the perspective of biblical studies. Readers unfamiliar with the discussions of the scope of the discipline may wish to begin with this essay.

Moving beyond the binary use of gender terms—man versus woman, male versus female—Lisa Dahill explores the rich and

often overlapping levels of gender in relation to Christian spirituality. Gender, she demonstrates, is far more than a basic form of classification; it is, in fact, a hermeneutical category. Unpacking meaning inevitably entails unpacking multiple gender categories and levels: of the person being studied; of the scholar doing the study; and indeed, of the very perceptions of God that ground the religious experience being studied.

At first blush the methodologies of the natural sciences appear largely incompatible with those of theology and spirituality in their cultures of evidence and their use of scientific and mathematical languages. Robert John Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, goes to the heart of the apparent disjuncture, revealing the rich possibilities for mutual influence between spirituality and the natural sciences. By introducing the concept of a hierarchy of disciplines and expanding it to include spirituality, Russell demonstrates how the discussion can be carried on in terms admissible in each discipline.

Given the pervasiveness of questions of suffering and the presence of evil, Douglas Burton-Christie believes it is not surprising how frequently they surface in contemporary experience. Although the genre of nature writing is not necessarily overtly religious, it nonetheless supplies a theater where these questions are dealt with as a matter of course. Burton-Christie uses two contemporary authors to press the issues of suffering and evil. Mary Kerr's work raises the questions: Is there any center to the cosmos? Can there be a God who cares? Czeslaw Milosz struggles with how to cope with both the beauty and the mathematical cruelty of the universe. Burton-Christie probes these authors for clues about the ways that such questions of God's justice surface as matters of spirituality in contemporary discourse.

The contemporary world is marked by religious pluralism; we are perhaps more aware of the astounding complexity of religious traditions in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. This pluralism poses a challenge to traditional understandings of Christianity as "the one true religion." As a scholar deeply engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue, Mary C. Boys asks scholars of Christian spirituality to acknowledge the inaccurate and destruc-

tive history in which Christians discount and denigrate Judaism as a legitimate spiritual tradition. Not only does Judaism have much to contribute to Christian spirituality, but scholars of Christian spirituality will consistently misinterpret their own tradition if they omit or subsume Judaism. She asks, "If Christians were to regard Judaism as a partner in waiting and working for the world's full redemption, what difference would it make both in our self-understanding and in our understanding of the religious 'other'?"

Alejandro García-Rivera sets very different interlocutors together in a promising border-crossing exercise. Putting interfaith dialogue in conversation with aesthetics allows García-Rivera to develop an *interfaith aesthetics*, where participants in interfaith dialogue come together in mutual appreciation and love of beautiful artifacts from each other's traditions. This aesthetic experience can engender a love for each other's traditions, deeper than articulating truths, that propels the participants into an interfaith "looking at by looking through." Interfaith aesthetics, García-Rivera believes, is the point where theology and spirituality meet, the place where "faith finds faith in faith itself."

Although we recognize that it is somewhat unusual to include an essay by the honoree in a volume of this type, we have chosen to do so. Sandra Schneiders's essay addresses a critical question that continually resurfaces: the relationship between the academic disciplines of Christian spirituality and theology. This essay contains Prof. Schneiders's latest thinking on this issue. She moves beyond the language of "problematic" disciplines to describe a role that theology can play in spirituality research to address the similarities and differences in the way that theology and spirituality approach a similar subject from differing viewpoints.

We hope that this collection of essays will provoke students and scholars of Christian spirituality, as well as practitioners who rely on Christian spirituality to fund their ministries, to continue critically thinking, discussing, writing and practicing Christian spirituality, moving it into its next decade. What will we be able to say in ten more years about this developing discipline? What will the leading questions be then? Who will emerge as the next generation of scholars? Whoever they may be, their debt to

Sandra Schneiders will continue to be profound. She has served as a major architect of the very discipline.

Notes

1. Log of the Doctoral Council, May 5, 1976. Office of the President and Dean. Claude Welch, 1971–82 Collection, Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, California.
2. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13 (1986): 253.
3. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 696.
4. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality," 270.
5. Sandra M. Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Spring 1994): 9.
6. Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (Spring 1998): 3.
7. Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," 694.
8. *Ibid.*, 695.
9. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality," 274. Schneiders borrows the phrase from Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 54–59.
10. Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," 695.
11. Historical references here are contained in an email message from Bradley Hanson to Bruce Lescher, September 20, 1997.
12. Seminal articles in the *Bulletin* and the early volumes of *Spiritus*, including two essays by Schneiders, have been reprinted in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).