Definitional and methodological questions in the study of religion and culture in the carpatho-balkan context

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DEFINITIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND CULTURE
IN THE CARPATHO-BALKAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The study of Carpato-Balkan religion presents methodological challenges to researchers. What do we mean by “religion”? How does it differ from other terms such as “spirituality” or “theology”? What methods are available for the study of it all in the context of a particular culture? What special methodological and definitional questions might pertain to the study of Carpato-Balkan religion?

Keywords: religion, methodology, church, spirituality, theology, culture.

Writing some years back, French scholar of religion, Michael de Certeau, commenting on the relationship between religion and culture, noted that we really cannot see religion apart from culture, because all the ways in which religion manifests themselves are products of culture. Sacred music, writings, rituals, spaces, symbols bear the mark of the culture that formed them.²

Despite that, certain religious believers wish to claim that their faith is somehow different from any other, because it is the true faith, created by God, and given us by Abraham, Jesus or Mohammed or some prophet sent from on high. The persistence of such claims in today’s world where knowledge of other religions has never been higher is as astonishing as it is certain.

The giants of the modern study of religion – and from a Romanian perspective, we must especially remember Mircea Eliade – were motivated by a modern spirit and methodology. They were confident they could abstract certain universals from world religions and study them, free from the passions and deliriums of faith. To them is due a great debt, because before them it was very hard indeed to see religion apart from theological polemics, which did very little to advance our understanding of the role that religion plays in the world’s culture.

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Today, however, we are in a new moment. Modernity’s analytical method sees too cold, too impersonal to explain certain aspects of religion. The demographic, technological, and economic changes that we refer to as globalization, bring with them challenges to individual and social identities. Such moments of transformation in the past most often have led to the rise of new religions. Today it is no different, in as much as there is widespread revival in religious interest around the world, especially in places like Eastern Europe where nations are rebuilding their civil society sectors.

Many years back, when the excitement about the study of spirituality was fresh in the American academy, I offered an analysis of the ways in which the term “spirituality” was being defined and of some of the methodological problems and opportunities that represented. I believe that many of those issues are relevant today for the study of Carpatho-Balkan religion. In the first part of this paper, I will reintroduce that earlier analysis and then, in the second part, I will raise several questions about its application to the Carpatho-Balkan context.

**Definitional Questions**

What do we mean by “religion”? How does it differ from other terms such as “spirituality,” or “theology”? What methods are available for the study of it in the context of a particular culture? What special methodological and definitional questions might pertain to the study of religion? My comments about definition will focus on English language sources.

The first term that must be distinguished is “spirituality.” Today growing numbers of people refer to themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” This odd creed probably means they are uncomfortable with the institutional and doctrinal dimensions of religion but happy with the experiential. In the Pew poll, ninety-two percent of the “spiritual but not religious” said they believe in God. Sixty-nine percent pray at least monthly; almost half pray daily. Sixty-three percent say religion is very or somewhat important to them.

A closer look at the term “spirituality” will make this clear.

The English word spirituality is derived from the French spiritualité, which came into common use in the seventeenth century. In the writings of Bossuet and Fenelon, the word is used to indicate the personal relation between men and women and God. It stresses the subjective aspects of the relation, emphasizing the psychological disposition of the individual. This use contrasts with...
with the earlier use of the Latin *spiritualitas* dating back to the fifth century, which, in Josef Sudbrack’s words, signified “the formal and creative element at the core of Christian existence.”

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe and North America the term remained the domain of the Roman Catholics. A survey of devotional writing in North America by Jon Alexander showed that the word did not appear in the titles of any of the more popular published works before 1800. Mainline Protestants simply avoided the term, preferring to speak of “devotion,” in the fashion of William Law’s 1728 classic *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, or “piety” in a style made famous by the German Pietists Philipp Jakob Spener, August Hermann Frank, and Nicolas Ludwig Count von Zinzendorf.

In the nineteenth century the advent of the Holiness movement in the United States prompted the use of such words as “inner life” or “hidden life” to describe the divine-human relationship. Thomas C. Upham, for example, wrote in 1845 his *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life* that was a careful analysis of the spiritual life that certainly would be labeled spirituality today. Even among Catholics, however, spirituality enjoyed little popularity until our own time. Alexander is right, I think, in speculating that the reason for this was a reluctance to conjure up the specter of emotional excess and heterodoxy associated with some of the French writers like Madame Guyon and Jean Joseph Surin who used *spiritualité* to describe what was later branded as Quietism. But with the growing willingness of Catholic theology to incorporate insights from modern psychology, a way was cleared for using the word as did Louis Bouyer in the 1950s to mean “the study of the reactions that the objects of religious faith arouse in the religious consciousness.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, the use of the term spread widely in North America. Alexander’s study found that the number of books and articles containing spirituality in their titles, listed in six major bibliographic guides to religious literature, rose from eleven in 1960 to forty-two in 1976. With this has come a tendency to use the word in a generic sense, as the following examples illustrate. Hans Urs von Balthasar, in a 1965 American edition of his work, defined spirituality as “the basic practical or existential attitude of man that is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his religious or ethically committed existence. The way in which he acts and reacts

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7 Thomas C. Upham, *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life* Boston, Boston, 1845.
habitually throughout his life according to his objective and ultimate insights and decisions.”

Here the emphasis is clearly on the subject’s attitude and the practical acts flowing from those religious commitments or ultimate insights that animate an individual. Gordon Wakefield in the 1983 Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality offers a similarly broad description. “Spirituality is a word used to describe those attitudes, beliefs, and practices, which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities.”

In his inimitable style, Raimundo Panikkar pushed the term to its broadest limits by speaking of spirituality as “one typical way of handling the human condition.”

Each of these definitions, with its emphasis on non-specific terms like “ultimate insights,” “human condition,” or “super-sensible realities” begs the question: How is spirituality, thus defined, different from “religion”? With the new awareness of non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism, in the West, the definition of religion has gone through a metamorphosis. Definitions based on specific theological presuppositions that are built into any talk about belief in a divine ruling power are less popular than they were in the 1950s. Definitions based on the etymology of the word are in vogue today. Thus, we often hear religion described as that which binds one to one’s origin and goal or that which one constantly turns to, reflecting possible meanings of the verbs religari and relegere, which are derived from the noun religio.

Another common tactic today is to offer only a judgment-free evaluation of the phenomena of religion. Ninian Smart elects in The Religious Experience of Mankind not to define but rather to describe six aspects of religion. They are the experiential, the symbolic, the social, the ethical, the institutional, and the doctrinal.

William Lessa and Evon Vogt in their reader on an anthropological approach to religion offer what sounds like Paul Tillich socialized: “Religion may be described as a system of beliefs and practices directed toward the ultimate concern of a society.”

Christopher Dawson’s definition, although it is limited to a Western theological perspective, like Lessa’s and Vogt’s, shifts the emphasis away from the individual’s experience to the broader social and institutional dimensions and thus is relevant here.

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“The word used to describe man’s relation to divine or superhuman powers and the various organized systems of belief and worship in which these relations are expressed.\textsuperscript{15} Today it is common for scholars to use the term without attempting to delineate the special domain of spirituality vis-a-vis religion.\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed it is difficult to see why Wakefield’s or Panikkar’s definitions of spirituality, for instance, could not serve well as abstract definitions of religion, or why Smart’s description of the “experiential dimension” of religion could not substitute for spirituality. The fact that there is little effort made distinguish between the definitions of these terms is, evidently, due to the overlap of the two. What is not plain in some of the formal definitions is more discernible in what is studied and how it is done. When spirituality is studied, in virtually every case I have seen, the scholar is attempting to highlight the personal, internal dimensions, over against the institutional, external dimensions. Religion no doubt can and does cover those internal dimensions, but it also involves the study of institutions, their polity, their \textit{cultus}, their symbols, and their language. Simply put, spirituality can be seen as a subset within the larger field of religion.

For this reason, definitions like Wakefield’s and Panikkar’s that avoid using the term religion are needlessly confusing and as such inadequate. Religion has been sufficiently stripped of its theological biases and made serviceable to the broadest constituency by means of the development alluded to above. We need not push its borders out any further by attempting to make spirituality a more inclusive term. Yet even if we let this tentative distinction between religion and spirituality stand, we are confronted with a problem. The primitive experience of the transcendent, which is the focus of spirituality, is doubtless a basis for further religious reflection and action; the generation of a mythology, the development of doctrine, the shaping of rituals, the building of an institution, all begin with the personal encounter of the sacred. Rudolf Otto similarly attempted to isolate the essence of religion in the encounter of the “the holy.”\textsuperscript{17} Also like Otto, the users of spirituality can be criticized for overemphasizing the psychology of religion to the neglect of other elements such as the moral and the theological. Try as they might, the students of spirituality will soon move from the study of the personal encounter of the numinous to broader areas that are the domain of other specialties. The analysis

\textsuperscript{15} Christopher Dawson, \textit{Religion and World History}, Garden City, 1975, p. 28.


\textsuperscript{17} Rudolph Otto, \textit{Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen}, Breslau, 1917.
of a spirituality that calls itself Christian or Hindu, for example, will demand that some criteria, theological or at least historical, be used to evaluate how faithfully it reflects its tradition. Even the attempt to highlight subjective experience will very quickly force one to look also at the social context in which the subject lives.

Why then use the term spirituality at all? Why not simply speak of religion with its manifold methodologies: psychology of religion, sociology of religion, theology, phenomenology of religion, and the like? It is evident that this could be done, and indeed, is done by some today. Why then does the term spirituality continue to grow in popularity when it, with its imprecise definitions and lack of any special methods, appears to add nothing to our understanding? Spirituality is a term that, at least in our own time, has worked its way into the academy from the grass roots up. It has grown up from the fertile seeds of the Vatican II reform, the catechetical renewal, the Neo-Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, the peace movements of the 1960s and the like. Religion in its modern usage had its origin in the optimistic days of the late nineteenth century during which men like Max Muller looked with great hope upon the new science of the day with the belief that when it applied to the subject matter of traditional religion it could yield a new breakthrough in metaphysical understanding. A vision of a grand Romantic synthesis of science and religion animated the earliest practitioners of Religionswissenschaft in a way that is virtually incomprehensible to many contemporaries. The promise of a happy marriage between science and religion was not fulfilled. I would suggest that although Religionswissenschaft has yielded useful insights, it has, in the minds of many, taken the heart, or I should say the spirit out of religion by its endless objectification and analysis. For all that it does, it does not deal with the experience of faith in a way that is satisfying to the popular mind. For despite our sophistication and our appreciation of the benefits of scientific inquiry, many sense that there is a dimension of reality that science with its positivistic presuppositions cannot adequately deal with. Ours is an age that has seen the successes of modern science and its failures. Spirituality puts back into religion just what science threatened to remove: “spirit”; what better word is there to signify the numinous, mysterious, transcendent dimension that religion, before Freud, and Marx, and Muller, always represented? The persistence of spirituality, then, is yet another sign of the passing of the modern, or as some prefer, the post-modern age.  

However, as much as it is a rejection of Religionswissenschaft’s “religion” the popularity of spirituality is not simply a return to a pre-critical religion. This becomes obvious when one looks at the ways in which spirituality is being

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studied. Students of spirituality are using the tools of modern history, theology, and the social sciences, but insisting on speaking of spirituality and in so doing introducing a symbol of the numinous that by its very presence critiques modernity’s reductionist tendencies and rejects its claims that its methods yield positive knowledge that is the highest form of human comprehension.

On another level, one that reaches further beyond the walls of academia, there is another reason for the current preference for using spirituality rather than a term composed of the word religion. Religion, simply put, has a public-relations problem in our own day that spirituality escapes. The barbs of early twentieth century scientism were aimed at religion. Marx called religion, not spirituality, the opiate of the masses, Freud wrote The Future of an Illusion about religion and H. L. Mencken and numerous other detractors unleashed their tirades against that hallowed term. However, even more to the point, religion, in its popular usage, is inextricably bound to the institutional expressions of the world’s great faiths, and this has made it liable to the archetypical disdain for tradition. Religious institutions also have at times, as in the period of the Reformation, demonstrated the ability to place limits on the experience of the numinous in a manner that produces widespread calls for reform and the multiplication of fresh forms of expression for the experience of transcendence. Institutional religion, at such moments, is stripped of its sense of transcendence and mystery.

Karl Rahner insightfully commented on this process in our own times. As he saw it, the contemporary person has difficulty in seeing a definitely articulated religion “with its thousand and one truths, customs, prescriptions, and rules, as the concrete obligation of God’s will and the necessary institution for his salvation.” People sense and revere the nameless and inexpressible. And for that reason, they find a complicated dogmatic system “too knowledgeable by far, too clever, rationalistic and positivist, too ready to lay down the law.” Rahner made this the basis for his argument for the rehabilitation of the concept of mystery in Catholic theology. For him, mystery is not a provisional reality that dissolves as truth is revealed to our reason and that will be wiped away in the visio beatifica. Instead he suggests that mystery is the “primordial and permanent” reality and that, rather than explaining it away, we need to be grasped by it and to abide in the positive state of unknowing, which is “constitutive and essential” to true knowledge of God.19 Rahner’s analysis provides yet another reason why spirituality as a symbol of the numinous, which is not wedded to institutional religion, appeals to an age seeking a new entrance way to holy ground.

His analysis also suggests why spirituality is currently more popular than “spiritual theology,” a word Pierre Pourrat used synonymously with spirituality

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in his 1920s work on the history of spirituality. Spiritual theology suggests that spirituality is a branch of theology; that suggestion may well be perceived by some as an attempt to capture the mystery of God with a complicated system, “too knowledgeable by far, too clever, rationalistic, and positivist.” Although contemporary theology has moved away from those tendencies, as Rahner himself so well exemplifies, spiritual theology is a term from a past when all the trends he castigated were present. Also, the term is unattractive in our age of the dialogue of world religions in which non-theistic religions play such a large part. Those are two formidable obstacles that spiritual theology is hard-pressed to overcome.

If, then, we accept that the common use of the term spirituality emphasizes the fundamental human experience of mystery, what then is the relation of it to “mysticism”? There is a significant body of literature on the subject, with much of the best work being done this century. Harvey Egan’s helpful book, What Are They Saying About Mysticism, makes clear the broad range of definitions of mysticism. To survey them all would be impossible here. For our purposes, I need only highlight two, and compare them to spirituality. Rahner offered a traditional, closely drawn theological definition of mysticism as a “purely non-conceptual experience of transcendence without imagery.” This insistence on the non-conceptual nature of the experience is the basis for the traditional distinctions in the West between meditation and the highest forms of infused contemplation, a gratuitous revelation of God that, in Rahner’s words, “destroys the conceptual and categorical insofar as they claim to be ultimate realities.” Andrew Louth, author of a work on the origin of mysticism in the West, defines his research as “a study of the supposed essence of religion, or God consciousness that precinds from any particular dogmatic framework.” Louth implies that the mystical experience has the non-conceptual character that Rahner stressed. He also adds an important element in his assertion that mysticism forms the essence of religion, an assertion that is not explicitly made by any of the definitions of spirituality considered above. Clearly, Louth’s definition focuses more precisely on the fundamental experience of transcendence than does a definition of spirituality as von Balthasar’s that speaks only of a “basic practical or existential attitude of man that is the consequence of the way in which he under stands his religious… existence.”

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It would seem, then, that if people today are seeking what I have called a symbol of the numinous to describe the core of religious experience, then mysticism is a better choice than spirituality. It is also evident from a sampling of some of the more popular definitions that numerous attempts have been made to delineate the exact perimeters of mystical experience, attempts that are much more developed than the broad-ranging definitions of spirituality we have seen. William James’s famous four marks of mystical experience represent a careful attempt to determine the extent of mystical experience and to place it in and thereby distinguish it from other varieties of religious experience. Although some might find the marks of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity either too general or simply inaccurate, at the very least they represent a serious attempt at careful analysis. R. C. Zaehner in his famous work, Mysticism Sacred and Profane, challenged the assertion that all mystical experiences are the same. He did so by a penetrating study of mystical experience that discovered no less than three distinct mystical states, only one of which is properly speaking theistic. Evelyn Underhill in her classic work on mysticism spent a major chapter trying to define what she described as one of the most abused words in the English language. After speaking of mysticism as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order,” she devoted the rest of the hefty volume to the justly famous study of the characteristics of mysticism and the five great stages of the mystical life. One last example will suffice: that of Underhill’s mentor, Baron Friedrich Von Hügel. His masterful two-volume study, The Mystical Element of Religion, offers an analysis of mystical experience in relation to the intellectual and institutional. The result is a work that, like the other studies of mysticism mentioned, offers a precision and depth that far outweighs anything I have seen written on spirituality.

Mysticism then appears to not only offer us a more clearly defined explanation of the fundamental experience of transcendence, but one that has been studied with much greater precision and comprehensiveness than spirituality. Why then does the latter term continue to grow in popularity? Why not instead speak of mysticism? First, it should be noted that some people have done just that. Bernard McGinn, for example wrote a history of Christian mysticism, and the series that I edited was originally called the Classics of Western Mysticism until marketing research indicated that Spirituality would be

26 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, New York, 1902.
a better choice. This latter fact is interesting, because it is a clue to one of the reasons why mysticism is not as popular a term, at least in the U.S.A. It is beyond dispute that Protestantism, especially in the forms that have had the greatest impact on America, has an aversion to the term mysticism. Reformed piety, which formed the bedrock of the dominant cultural and religious force of the U.S. Puritanism stressed the demystification of religion and hence had no interest in using the word mysticism except to debunk Catholicism. The stark Puritan churches of New England with their large clear windows and plain white walls are a testimony to a piety that celebrated the light of the Reformation in which God in Christ shown plainly for all to see. No “hocus pocus,” no shadowy rituals in an unknown tongue, and no priestly caste to mediate God’s presence were tolerated. God had revealed Himself in the Scriptures where all could plainly learn His ways. Outside of the Reformed tradition, this disdain for mystery was also present among the Methodists, who along with the Baptists became the dominant forces in the religious life of rural and frontier Americans in the nineteenth century. Wesley, himself was first attracted to the mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa, George Lopez, and Fenelon, but later repudiated mystical experience as a “trap” that lulled Christians into passivity and made them neglect their duties to preach the gospel and do good works. An apt illustration of the attitude toward mysticism in nineteenth-century American Protestantism comes from the life of Orestes Brownson. Raised as a Congregationalist, he was in turn a Unitarian, a Universalist, and the founder of his own Church of the Future before becoming a Catholic. He can lay claim to having had one of the most astute philosophical and theological minds in his day, yet, while on the verge of converting to Catholicism in 1843, he counseled a young friend with mystical leanings, named Isaac Hecker. He encouraged him to join the church or risk being deceived by his enthusiasm and fertile religious imagination. “You must either become a Catholic or a mystic,” he warned, fully oblivious to the possibility of being both, since “mystic” then connoted a confused, vague-thinking enthusiast with serious emotional imbalances. Protestantism in America has not lost its distaste for the word, and hence, spirituality is preferred by Protestants and by others wishing to work in an ecumenical atmosphere.

However, there is yet another reason why mysticism is not a popular one that centers on an ongoing debate about the relationship of mystical experience to Christian perfection, a debate that lasted over the centuries among Catholics. The classical distinction between ascetical and mystical theology brings the

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issue into focus. Some like A. A. Tanquerey in his *The Spiritual Life* argued for a basic discontinuity between the ordinary spiritual life of asceticism and the extraordinary mystical life that involved special graces and experiences limited to a few.\(^{32}\) Others, like Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange in his *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, stressed the continuity of the ascetical and mystical lives, emphasizing the commonality and accessibility of mystical experience.\(^ {33}\) Although the latter view seems to be more prevalent today, there still linger certain misgivings. However much one might wish to stress that in some sense all Christians are mystical, the idea simply does not have the cogency to stick, since the term mystic, when used either in its laudatory or pejorative senses, has so often been reserved for a person who had extraordinary experiences; most folks do not want to place themselves in that category any more than they wish to refer to themselves as “saintly,” even though certain Protestants insist that all true believers are saints.

For these reasons, then, spirituality has won the popularity contest at least for the time being over the analogous terms, e.g. Spiritual theology, mysticism, and religion. It remains for us to consider some of the special problems confronted in studying spirituality, the opportunities created by the current situation, and the implications for Carphato-Balkanic religion.

### Two More-Recent Methods

Currently numerous methods are being used to study spirituality many of which are eclectic. I would like to look at two different approaches, as used in recent studies. The first approach looks at historical manifestations of specific examples of spirituality in America. The second attempts to draw on history and observation of current trends as a basis for making statements about general characteristics of “American spirituality.”

Historians are by nature jacks-of-all-trades and commonly use methods from the social sciences and theology when analyzing spirituality. Charles Hambrick Stowe’s *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England* is a good example of this. He took as his subject “the form, content, and spiritual impact of the worship and private devotional activity” of seventeenth-century New Englanders. In a skillful fashion, he blended a theological-historical approach with a social history methodology, influenced directly by recent developments in American studies that have highlighted the importance of borrowing techniques from

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anthropology, sociology, and economics. Typically, Hambrick-Stowe looked for new data, which would bring to light the people’s devotional experiences better, perhaps, than the much-studied sermons and tracts. This he found in devotional manuals. By looking at the actual practice of devotion and by using neglected sources, he was able to draw certain conclusions with implications for our understanding of Puritan theology. Perry Miller’s implication that Puritanism stressed rationality above affectivity appears dubious when the numerous devotional practices of the people are studied. Present from the beginning of Puritanism in New England, they were not desperate late seventeenth-century inventions; nor were Puritans only interested in conversion to the neglect of the ongoing journey. Contrary to some commonly held notions, Hambrick-Stowe found that: “salvation in Puritan spirituality was not a fully achieved state but always a journey and a goal.”

Another work on the history of spirituality in America that deserves mention is Joseph P. Chinnici’s *Devotion to the Holy Spirit in American Catholicism: 1875-1901*. In this work, Chinnici attempts to trace the development of the devotion among American Catholics during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He focuses on the emergence of two distinct traditions: one embodied by Isaac T. Hecker in his 1875 *Exposition on the Needs of the Church and the Age*, and the other reflected in Otto Zardetti’s *Special Devotion to the Holy Ghost*. Throughout, Chinnici is concerned with the cultural as well as the theological significance of the devotion, mindful of the French structuralist school and the social anthropology of Mary Douglas. He illustrates that “Spirit” functioned as a symbol of synthesis in an age racked by the unsettling forces that threatened to break up the traditional worldview. The development of the Hecker tradition, which stressed the suitability of devotion to the Spirit for all American Catholics, is carefully traced, as is the Zardetti tradition, inherited from Henry Manning and developed as a special devotion for clergy.

The historical approach used in our examples stresses the concreteness of spirituality. It is the phenomenon of the human experience of God, as it is manifested in specific historical situations that the historian seeks. As Michel de Certeau stressed, there can be no separating the phenomenon from its cultural, historical expressions. The structures of society, the terms in which it voices its aspirations, the objective and subjective forms of the common conscience, build up the religious conscience, which in turn manifests them. A culture is the language of spiritual experience. Pierre Pourrat’s approach of chronicling the development of major spiritual traditions with little regard to the broader

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cultural context would find little favor among the new breed of historian of spirituality. Just as the history-of-ideas school has been forced to acknowledge the attacks of social historians, so will these new historians critique the old style historians? For example, Andrew Louth’s *Origins of Mysticism in the West* when judged by social historical standards offers a picture of ideas functioning in a cultural vacuum. For these reasons, the tendency among some to use spirituality in a generic sense is unsettling to a historian, for without understanding the culture in which a given spirituality was lived, chances are good that we will misinterpret it. A definition historians would like, which avoids the generic problem is offered by Carolyn Osiek: “the experience, reflection, and articulation of the assumptions and consequences of religious faith as it is lived out in a concrete situation.”

When we turn to a second currently used approach, we are presented with a distinct methodology. A popular technique is to describe broad general characteristics that are said to be part of what is simply called American spirituality. An example of this is Jean Le Clercq’s address delivered at the American College in Louvain in February 1983. He is careful to restrict himself to American Catholic spirituality, which, he argues, is popular, committed, and pluralistic. What was the basis for obtaining these three characteristics? Simply Le Clercq’s knowledge of American history, his current observations as a French “lover of America”, and a rather casual survey of students and faculty at Fordham who were asked to list what they thought were the main traits of American spirituality. Le Clercq, reflecting on American culture with skill and wit, is part of a long tradition that dates back at least as far as Jean de Crevecoeur’s 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* and has included, most notably, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and Jacques Maritain’s *Reflections on America*. Another example of the same approach is Joseph A. Tetlow’s article “American Catholic Spirituality.” Maintaining that the American experience has left Catholics with a unique spirituality that shapes public worship, church polity, and individual interior life, he lists the following marks of that spirituality: it is ahistorical, democratic, functional, provisional, therapy-oriented, world-building, and not given to the *via negativa*. In each case his analysis rests on identifying a common trait of the American character and tracing its impact on spirituality. For example, American spirituality is said to be “experiential” because “Americans take ‘experience’ as one of the primary categories of being and knowing.” It is “ahistorical” because “Catholics tend to ignore our history in the United States.” It is “experimental” because “American

life-style was founded in a repudiation of the past."\textsuperscript{40} There is doubtless a great deal of truth in the analyses of Le Clercq and Tetlow, and I have at times used a similar method myself.\textsuperscript{41} They represent ways of studying the impact of culture on spirituality and certainly, that impact was profound. It is important to note, however, that their method incorporates a use of history as the basis for interpretation. Le Clercq, although he used as a resource his own survey of current trends in American spirituality, clearly pointed to his dependence on history: “the enduring characteristics [of American Catholic spirituality] emerge from roots of American Catholicism, out of its past and present development, and we cannot understand, nor even discern this without recourse to history.”\textsuperscript{42} Tetlow too harkened back to history in which American Catholics have spent “two-and-a-half centuries struggling to acculturate their tradition into an experiment in nation-building.”\textsuperscript{43}

The problem is that the analysis of American history on which Le Clercq and Tetlow draw has been cogently challenged. In the 1950s historians such as Henry Steele Commager developed what became known as the “national character” school. His \textit{The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s} contended that a thoroughly homogeneous American character had emerged since the late nineteenth century characterized by traits like optimism, belief in progress, pragmatism, and experimentalism.\textsuperscript{44} Social historians in the late 1960s, however, began questioning the validity of Commager’s analysis. By focusing on the histories of marginalized peoples, they uncovered an array of values and character traits that Commager did not consider. The works of Philip J. Greven, Jr., Eugene D. Genovese, and David Skanner made it increasingly clear that Commager’s “American Mind” was the White, Anglo Saxon, Protestant mind of the literate, educated class, and, hence, not necessarily that of poor Irish and Italian immigrants in New York parishes. Jay Dolan, for example, in his social history of nineteenth-century urban Catholicism has illustrated just how much diversity there was within the church and has brought into clear relief the tensions between mainline Protestant values and those of the Catholic immigrants.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40} Joseph A. Tetlow, “American Catholic Spirituality”, \textit{New Catholic World} 255, July/August 1982, pp. 152-155.
\textsuperscript{41} See my editorial in \textit{New Catholic World} 225, July/August 1982, p. 150, where I used an approach that I would now be critical of.
\textsuperscript{42} Le Clercq, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Tetlow, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{44} Henry Steele Commager, \textit{The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s}, New Haven, 1950.
Furthermore, in the years since 1950, the American mind, even that segment of it constituted along the demographic lines implicit in Commager, has changed significantly. In the final section of his monumental *A Religious History of the American People*, Sydney E. Ahlstrom sketched out what he saw as the major factors, which emerged in the 1960s, that resulted in the passing of the Puritan epoch that had held sway over the central religious, political, and intellectual institutions of our country since the seventeenth century. Citing the rise of the antiwar movement, the declining dedication to the doctrinal and moral messages of the churches, the new awareness of pluralism, and the increasing awareness of public violence and environmental exploitation, he observed: “the idea of America as a Chosen Nation and a beacon to the world was expiring. The people had by no means become less religious, and their sense of moral urgency was, if anything, heightened. Yet unmistakably at the heart of the prevailing anxiety was the need for reexamining fundamental conceptions of religion, ethics, and nationhood.”

Given our new awareness of the diversity of the American character in the past and the significant changes that have taken place during the last twenty years, how is it possible to speak generally of the characteristics of American spirituality, which are constructed, it appears, by combining past generalizations about the American mind and modifying them on the basis of one's own random perceptions of the present? If any generalizations can be made about religion in America, they are that it is diverse and derivative. This itself should alert us to the dangers of speaking about an “American spirituality.” (Le Clercq, curiously enough, realizes there is more than one American spirituality and indicates that in his description of the pluralistic character of American spirituality. However, he fails to see that that very pluralism raises doubts about the validity of his methodology.) In addition, as we have seen, the term spirituality, when used in a generic sense, becomes vague and problematic. To combine these two words and speak of American spirituality is imprudent, if we mean to connote a common-characteristics approach. I think it wiser and more accurate to talk instead of American spirituality only to connote the many spiritualities of America. The latter usage emphasizes the need to be concrete and specific in discussing historical manifestations of spirituality in America. It also simply reflects the obvious diversity present in the American experience. Does this mean that we can never make any generalizations about spirituality in America? No, I do not think so. What it does mean is that we must make sure that any such generalizations are based on data that can be verified using the best contemporary historiography. If the generalizations Commager made no longer ring true, perhaps there are new ones to take their place, but given the current mood in American history, it might be a long while until that happens.

Opportunities

Should we, then, go one step further and simply drop the troublesome term spirituality? I do not think so, for despite the problems associated with its use, there are opportunities created by its growing popularity that should be developed. In conclusion, I would like to sum them up. First, as we saw, the term functions as a symbol of the numinous, this is more cogent than analogous terms. As such, it focuses attention on the fundamentals of religious experience. It challenges us, therefore, to rethink many of the old questions in a new light. As Josef Sudbrack pointed out, we are called to develop a new hermeneutic, one that will take into account the new picture of human psychology that has emerged in our century, the new picture of world religions that we see, the new picture of society and the relation of religious consciousness and socio-economic factors that has emerged since Marx. The widespread acceptance of spirituality among Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christians also presents the opportunity to examine the fundamentals of the human experience of God in an ecumenical light. With a richness of resources heretofore unavailable and an irenic attitude that allows mutual learning and exchange, our understanding of spirituality can reach a new level.

Lastly, the final opportunity created by the use of this term arises from the linkage between spirituality and praxis. Whatever it may mean, spirituality is used to connote the way humans live out their faith, or at least their moral commitments. Both the attitudes engendered by their relationship to those ultimate values and the actions that flow from them is the stuff of spirituality. It is for this reason that Josef Sudbrack could say the praxis of theology is spirituality.

Along this line, Matthias Neuman offered a careful attempt to delineate the relationship between a spirituality and a theology. Centering his analysis on the social-phenomenological method of Alfred Schutz, he argued that spirituality and theology each function as distinct sources of religious meaning in a person’s life, with spirituality exercising the dominant structuring effect in the awareness of most people.47 In any attempt to better understand the relationship between religious belief and action and ultimately between religious praxis and theory, the study of spirituality functions as a rich resource.

The Carpatho-Balkanic Context

What are some of the implications of this for the study of religion and spirituality in the Carpatho-Balkanic context? First, the historical differences

DEFINITIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION
AND CULTURE IN THE CARPATHO-BALKAN CONTEXT

between the American and Carpatho-Balkan contexts are profound and cannot be easily overstated. In America, the voluntary, denominational model dominated. In that context, there was never a state church. Religion played an important role in shaping the culture, but as an actor in civil society, not as a part of the state apparatus. Persons could elect which religion they would join. Although there might be some pressures on the individual to the contrary, the individual was free to change religions, free to determine his level of participation, and free to end association with the religion of his birth. Religion played a profound role on the person and the society, but never by virtue of a privileged role in the society. In the Carpatho-Balkan context, the dominant religion was a national church that enjoyed a unique relationship with the state historically and that retained that privilege even under communism. The communist regimes, however, while retaining some of the historic trappings of the church-state relationship, radically altered that relationship and became the oppressors, rather than the patrons, of religion. Their attitude toward religion was not merely a secular indifference but an outright hostility, born of a crazed materialistic philosophy that substituted communist ideology for religious creeds and political personality cults for spiritual devotion. The Orthodox churches were cynically infiltrated and corrupted into organs of state control. Yet, even in the midst of this, genuine religious experiences occurred and many members of religious groups found ways to stay true to their beliefs in the face of government hostility.

The result was that religion occupied different places both in public and in private spheres. In addition to the differences in the public space already noted, religion in the individual life of the person functioned differently. The vital link between private and social religious expression was altered under communist regimes. Religion was privatized, but not as a result of indifference but oppression. One implication of that for today is that the currently popular approach to religion of the “spiritual but not religious” might well play out differently in the Carpatho-Balkan context that in the American. In the former context, religious persons of the last century had to develop two distinct religious behaviors. Publicly they had to appear indifferent, while privately they had to work hard to maintain a faith whose social dimension was restricted. Whereas in America, the “spiritual but not religious” drop out of the public expression of religion out of indifference, boredom, or ignorance, in the Carpatho-Balkan context, the more avid believers were forced to make the transition to public indifference despite their strong inner attachment to the institutional and public dimensions of their faiths.

A similar analysis could be made about “spirituality” versus “religion.” As shown, “spirituality” at least in the American context means an emphasis on the inner, experiential, personal dimensions of religion over the institutional, dogmatic, intellectual, and public dimensions. Are persons in the Carpatho-
Balkanic context already accustomed to this approach toward religion? Or has the fall of communism and the return of free public worship and religious expression already vitiated the effects of communism on religious expression?

Another factor differentiating the two contexts is the role that religion plays in nationalism. In the Carpatho-Balkanic context, Orthodoxy and nationalism were often linked. National Orthodox churches presented the folk, the nation. They were not merely voluntary associations. Those national churches stood apart from other Christian churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, which was seen as foreign culturally and politically, and Protestantism, which was viewed in some of the same ways.

Likewise, the role of minority religions is different in the two contexts. In America, minority religions suffered little overt persecution especially from the state, which has preserved neutrality toward religions and incorporated constitutional mechanisms that favor, rather than discourage minority religions. In the Carpatho-Balkanic context, the face of the national church influenced social attitudes towards minority religions.

All of this would suggest the importance of using empirical approaches to the study of religion in the Carpatho-Balkanic context, which take into account the actual lived experience of religious people today. Likewise, approaches that attempt to define the broad characteristics of “Carpatho-Balkanic spirituality” or some such thing would likely not accurately capture the realities of religion in the lives of people today.