Christian Spirituality
A Reinterpretation--for our time

It should go without saying that Christian spirituality is an object of perennial concern in every Christian--except as he might permit himself to be diverted by the little phrase "...for our time." Yet attention to times and seasons is not of itself a hindrance to the practice of Christian spirituality--unless one permitted himself also to stop praying without ceasing.

It is precisely in observing the relation between prayer and "the times" that the battlefield of spirit seems spread out indefinitely; and the attendant dizziness recalls us to the sober reflection that we ought not try to go beyond where we have not yet begun. We recur then to the essential title of our topic--Christian Spirituality--and try to face squarely what many thinkers seem to boggle at, namely, the nature of spirituality. In devotional discourse no term is so promiscuously employed, yet the word "spirituality" continues to command at least emotional respect, if not intellectual concern. In our time one can pronounce grandiloquently that God is dead, but how shall he declare that spirituality is dead also?

For those Christians who stubbornly persist in the notion that praying without ceasing is prayer toward an absolute object of devotion, it is a matter of great moment that some among their brothers should pronounce that object "dead"; for, if these coroners are not misled, it would be strange to go on praying without ceasing to what had long since ceased authentically to be.

But we must not pause overlong with the more dramatic, the more timely debates, lest in our concern for the times we should grotesquely fail to advance with them. Yet, having paused we might not regret rechecking and perhaps reestablishing our bearings.

The great thinkers who have been our teachers warn us that when taking thought it is no small feat to begin at the beginning. And, as if this were not ample caution, they remind us in concert with Aristotle, that knowledge brings no benefit to the morally weak. We are thus introduced to the hiatus between theory and practice, and the implied warning that we ought not to collapse theory into practice, nor practice into theory.

With no conjunction of words is it easier to perform a like collapse than with the words Christian and spirituality; for Christendom's piety commonly holds that if it is Christian it is spiritual, and if it is spiritual it is Christian. But there parades also among us a marvelous

inversion of this collapse, which holds that if it is Christian, it will become secular, and if it becomes secular (among us) it was once Christian. It would be churlish to overlook the dialectical shrewdness that contrived this prodigy; yet even a less nimble intellect unable to walk the high wire of dialectic early sees that those who contrive the first collapse seek only to preserve their souls against the flesh and the devil and have no words for the times--not any times. And as for the second collapse, that ingenious inversion of the first, though indeed issuing from a mouth speaking great things, how shall it hide that it has long since thrown away its soul to the present age?

The first collapse counts the world well lost, while the second has nothing of heaven to lose. Such are the paths that lead beyond where neither company of travellers shows the stomach to start over. Yet, a concern for spirituality faces even a third alternative--a double-minded hesitation between the world and God where, so far from trying to go beyond where it has not yet begun, is wanting in the courage to begin at all. Irony itself appears more often seductive than the object which it bears on. Who has not tarried so long with it as to avoid tempting himself into the position that the Gospel is, after all, a paradox? Whereupon with intellect freshly titilated he must by all means suspend both personal piety and duty toward neighbor until he gets clearer, paradoxically, on the paradox. So much for the third alternative and, for that matter any and all alternatives. Let us rather try to begin at the beginning and do that by distinguishing, first, the beginning.

A genuine and Christian concern for Christian spirituality must see that its object is twofold: 1) spirituality as such and 2) spirituality distinguished by its Christian character. Spirituality, as a quality of the devoted life, is shared in by all sorts and conditions of men, Christian and non-Christian, regardless of culture. Their devotion is qualified by a certain response to the fact of human finitude accepted as the case. It is not practiced in response to a mere awareness of this fact. Thus it is free of subjectivism or any debased experimentalism. Such men and women face human nature's radical limit as being simply the case and not a matter for explanation or manipulation. These persons are not seduced into pride of intellect by following theories of human nature or history which obscure, explain away or deny the case. Nor are they wasting energies on magical or technical efforts to alter the case.

They face the case and consent to it. And this consent is the first and basically spiritual act in the life of man. That comparatively few effect it is attested by the classic Scriptures of all great cultures in that these documents exhort to an end no majority of men pursues singlemindedly, let alone reaches. It is in no sense a mere consent to death. That requires resignation only. This devotional consent requires faith, a divine energy; for the act of belief which

this consent constitutes, is no matter of choice in a reasonable context which any reasonable person of good will might 'try on for size'. Hypotheses, theories, options have nothing to do with it. What is it then? It is consent to the non-relative primordial relation between finite being and the infinite; and, in particular, to the non-relative primordial relation between man and God. Either this non-relative relation is the case or all differentiations and distinctions are without a stable reference and so illusory; and, if illusory, so is any observation that would pronounce them so.

This creaturely limit occasions for man the possibility of a primordial offense. Without the occasion for this first offense, the second occasion for offense, namely, the cross, is without ontological significance. This is a crucial matter for the Christian to observe, for unless the cross has ontological significance it reduces to a vulgar sentimentality from which no amount of moral, personal or collective heroics can save it. For man, the primordial ontological occasion for offense is irreducible since it turns upon the case and not on theory.

Either one takes offense at this non-relative primordial relation between himself and God, or in faith he consents to it. That one can deceive himself into believing he has made this consent--when in fact he has not even faced the possibility of the offense--is nowhere more apparent than in the history of philosophy. And where better to look than toward the pious crowd over against Socrates? In accusing him of impiety they fancied themselves fit judges of man's relation to the Ultimate. But he, anticipating the craven premium they placed upon life, remarks that one should not reckon the chances of life or death but only whether he performs right-action; that fear of death shows only that we think we know what we do not know; that wherever a man's station is, there ought he to remain without shrinking in fear from what he does not know to be good or evil.

Still more poignantly related to 'our times' is his attitude toward the divine oracle. He brings no systematic skepticism toward it, but humbly goes about trying to prove it irrefutable. He never tries to turn the non-relative relation between himself and the divine into a matter for reflection by musing to himself, 'but might it not also be the case that...?' He knows the case is not a problem. The problem lies in his relation to it. Any question as to the case is after the fact of the case; and so, in effect, like any man concerned for wisdom he says in faith, "indeed, it is primordially the case that...now how ought I to order myself to it accordingly?"

Every man, insofar as he matures adequately, must confront this self-inquiry, and the history of thought is replete with ingenious ways to evade the encounter. Such ways are perennial attempts to turn the case into a problem. But the case is an ontological mystery,

not a puzzle. The adequate and finitely human relation to authentic mystery is obedience to revelation as Socrates' life attests: "I will be persuaded by the divine rather than you and will not give up philosophy and exhorting you to give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your souls." A life of such obedience includes the act of prayer. That Socrates was a man of prayer is shown in the Phaedrus where he prays "that the inner and the outer man be one". This prayer is Socrates' confession of his finitude and all theoretical inquiry toward the immortality of the soul is quite beside the point here because he is praying not for his soul but for himself, himself the man in all inner and outer respects--somehow divided yet not on that account caught in anxious despair. He is a praying man asking in faith that he might so order himself to his radical limit, that in the power of the divine he might always be completing himself. He does not pray that his finitude be removed, but that his relation to it be made sound and functional. And, essentially, for more grace and favor than that no man can ask while yet in faith--though he might extend the list of petitions indefinitely if he prayed in anxious and envious despair. Or, perhaps in a weary resignation, he could succeed in altogether giving over prayer by collapsing himself into his finitude, whereupon having finally succeeded in losing himself in the world he vainly imagines he has gained the world itself. But the world is not so easily mocked and knows him for the fraud he is, since it, too, despairs that it must also pass away.

At this point we are in danger of going beyond where we obligated ourselves to begin. For nowhere so much as in praying is a man likely to seduce himself out of eternity. Perhaps he despairingly prays for faith. But that cannot help him because it is in faith that he must pray to be kept from despairing. Faith is always available to him. He has only to consent to receive it. Yet he is unable to do this while he remains in envious relation to his radical limit or identifies himself with that limit. If one is effectively to pray 'help thou mine unbelief' he must sincerely precede the request with the confession 'Lord, I believe.' (Mark 9:24). If, enviously rejecting his ontological limit, he goes on to turn such an act of belief upon himself he must from there proceed fantastically to play God. Yet, if in weary resignation he collapses himself into his finitude--thus identifying himself with the case--the occasion for belief is swallowed up in spiritual suicide. In neither case will he consent to the non-relative primordial relation between himself and the Unconditioned.

It is no small matter continually to bear humbly in mind that since one is not omniscient, he cannot know in advance what action is best, but only, in faith, what is better; that since he is not omnipotent he cannot force even his better action to prevail; that nevertheless he must act--even in seeking not to act--yet for every action there is a corresponding consequence that cannot be annulled by any manner of foresight or hindsight, good intentions or remorse. The worm of desire to overcome such radical limits is not eradicated by

bearing these limits in mind--as though by taking adequate thought one could constrain both will and feeling. It is no wonder then that mature men soberly, humbly and discerningly undertake to learn to pray, praying with their first prayer, "Lord, teach us how to pray, for we know not what we should pray for as we ought." (Luke 11:1; Rom. 8:26)

It is one thing to pray out of a desire to learn; such praying presupposes a capacity to grow in knowledge. It is quite another thing to pray out of a recognition of our total ignorance of what is necessary to proper prayer. Once again we are brought back to the beginning; for here we are confessing our want of the one starting point needful--than without which we are unable adequately to begin to pray at all. Here we are not confessing that we should like to improve on what we already have. On the contrary, we are here confessing that we do not have the very thing required for our making any improvement whatsoever, knowing neither what to ask for nor how to ask for it.

The first petition of the model prayer we call the Lord's Prayer asks not that our world order be changed into heaven or utopia but rather that heaven's order should direct our own. 'Thy kingdom come' is not 'may our world fully develop its latent promise.' The first petition implies obedience to heaven's rule rather than a consummation of our own rule. Clearly, first the fruit of obedience is prayed for in the second petition, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', (for the divine will cannot be actualized normatively in our lives if we will not consent to it). This inversion of the genetic order that ordinarily proceeds from possibility to actuality is profoundly significant. It means that we pray first for the negation of the possibility to disobey the divine rule. We pray that a potentiality in us be negated rather than realized; and, furthermore, we pray this first. We pray this first because ordinary development from possibility to actuality is precisely not the first concern of spirituality. The essential concern of spirituality is an actuality, a gift of God, but which we must maintain ourselves available to in order that it might continually empower us to obey what for want of that actuality we could not obey, i.e., the will of God. Thus it is not the case that if we exercise our potential for obeying the will of God then the kingdom of heaven 'must come', i.e., be a present and abiding actuality for us, if the will of God is to be done at all.

This relation to the will of God is not usually put forward for what it is. The relation is absolute and not relative to our potentiality. Further, the stability of this relation is not grounded in our possibility but in the divine actuality. It is not a matter of 'if we will....' It is simply a matter of 'we must....' Precisely here is the occasion for the ontological offense--not because God is greater than man. (After all, that might turn out to be just a matter of degree). The occasion for offense is none other than that man is not God.

That man is not God indicates that man must undergo the divine actuality in obedience and patience. It must be undergone in obedience because the non-relative primordial relation between man and God entails man's finitude, that he is this particular and unique man and not another; which is to say that he bears within him an internal necessity which is not of his own contriving. And he is accountable to this necessity. The divine actuality must be undergone patiently because our inner necessity, our uniqueness, requires to be expressed adequately. Yet this uniqueness, though primordially given to us in advance, is never exhaustively disclosed to us during our lifetime. Since one is unable for himself to disclose adequately his uniqueness to himself he must wait upon the divine to disclose it to him as it wills. This waiting on the divine characterized Socrates--as is evidenced in his claim that his internal voice never told him what to do but only what not to do. He was continually discovering himself by making himself available to the divine initiative. Thus he was always at the task of patiently determining his limit while living out his promise in devoted hope.

We can now point precisely to the nature of the occasion for our first and ontological offense. Subjectively there is nothing for it but to wait patiently on God. Objectively we must remain behind him, never trying to catch up with him or get ahead of him. Such patient waiting expresses true and worshipful reverence and due regard to human nature's radical limit.

When the Genesis story of man's finitude and fall is contemplated against man's continuing need for patience and consent through faith there is no longer a seeming need to collapse anxiety into finitude. One's essentially dependent condition (which requires unconditional obedience in finite freedom) is a condition that calls for a functional adoration and waiting--not rebellion. The notion that Adam's actualized finite freedom necessarily entails estrangement is not supported by a careful reading of the Genesis text. There is nothing in the story to suggest that had man waited upon God to teach him what he ought to know that God, nevertheless, would have persistently withheld that knowledge from him. That man chooses to believe the serpent rather than to trust God indicates only that man refuses to give his consent to the non-relative primordial relation between himself and God and in no way suggests that actualized freedom cannot be realized without estrangement. Traditional Chalcedonian Christology quite rightly implies the possibility of actualized freedom without estrangement.

It is a curious notion that wisdom is necessarily bought at the price of estrangement, as though the words "Then the eyes of both were opened" (Genesis 3:7) signify an actualized dignity--as though, through an act quite of their own, the man and woman achieve a functional wisdom. But wisdom is not essentially a matter of evolution or self-determination. It is first a matter of godly fear than without which no beginning in wisdom is ever made. It is a matter of respect to limit, that entity

which interposes, interjects, interpolates itself between things so that they might come together without annihilating each other. (There is a beautiful Sanskrit word, sometimes used for 'limit': samanta, literally, 'having [their] edges together'). Limit grounds justice; thus, 'Son, if thou desire wisdom, keep justice, and God will give her to thee....' (Ecclesiasticus 1:33) If wisdom is a matter of evolution and self-determination it would have been strange in the Christ to have prayed: 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and has revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.' (Luke 10:21).

Essential distance is one thing; estrangement, another. And all depends upon how we undergo the distance between ourselves and God as to whether we shall or shall not in actualized freedom come to the peace that passeth understanding. Perfect love casts out fear not because it annihilates the distance between us and God, but because it puts that distance to a holy use wherein communion between God and creature is generated, maintained and always being consummated. To have one's eyes opened to the wisdom of this world at the cost of becoming blind to the wisdom of God could appeal only to one who had already put that distance to a profane use, after first becoming offended at that distance itself.

Clearly, the first occasion for offense is properly the occasion for patience, for consenting to remain at the beginning rather than trying to go beyond our finite station in being. And why is it functionally the occasion for patience? Because the distance between ourselves and God is not only love's opportunity but also faith's trial. The trying of faith effects patience. (James 1:2-3). And unless patience is allowed to have 'her perfect work' we cannot continue completing ourselves in God; nor be ever learning, as Lady Julian of Norwich says, that "God is nearer to us than our own soul".

II

If, in the power of God, one through consent keeps himself from becoming enviously or contemptuously offended at the distance between himself and God he has made his beginning in the spiritual life. But he has not yet done with occasions for offense. At this point Christianity brings forward the second occasion. It is the Cross. It is not the tragedy of the cross that makes possible that offense. The Gospel will not leave it at that; for the tragic view of history accomodates itself only heroically to the record of man's inhumanity to man while savoring the sorrowful beauty of its own austere dispassion, its noble disdain and titanic self-affirmation. The merely historical cross occasions pity but not necessarily offense.

The possibility of offense at the Cross appears when the Christian confesses that it is God who hangs upon it; for there is a beginning

which must be made here also. The beginning is found in the proclamation that the Word became flesh. It is not that God once entered history, stayed awhile, was treated atrociously and then departed--as though he were not always entirely present in the order of things that come to be and pass away. Is not the Word "the image of the invisible God... in whom all things were created through him and for him? And in him do not all things hold together?" (Col. 1:15-17). This we might accept without the possibility of offense if our piety were pure enough. Unfortunately, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" says more than that, and something that distinguishes it in kind.

This distinction recurs again to the non-relative relation between creature and Creator. Perhaps one has consented to this as the case and rests tranquilly in the knowledge that God and he have their respective places. One might come finally to lose himself in wonder and in praise at such sublime order--that is, unless he hears someone confess that God has crossed that line while yet remaining God. And whereas before he was once without a stable reference by which to order his life and then prayerfully consented to learn of it, indeed began to learn it and knew intimations of the peace that passeth understanding, this new confession throws his understanding once again into a wild confusion. God who made the order which this man comes finally to adore seems not himself to respect it; and man is once again without a place to call his own.

Perhaps in all sobriety, humility and discernment one might, in praying, come to submit himself to start all over again, consenting to be taught once more from the beginning. He might come to learn that God is not limited by His own nature (i.e., His essence) and so the last structural wall collapses that so tidily preserved one's territorial rights.

It is now a question of whether God has swallowed one up completely through his magical powers of self-expansion or whether he has done the unthinkable; whether he has restrained himself and performed in advance an act of renunciation whereby he makes room for creatures infinitely less than and distant from himself while remaining present to himself in them through his love. The Cross proclaims it is the second rather than the first. It is the unthinkable; for the Lamb has been slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). The historical Cross, which would not have occurred had man denied himself for the sake of God, is ontologically grounded in God's primordial denial and sacrifice of himself for our sakes. His sacrificial presence in his creatures empowers us, if we so consent, to participate in the divine life. Having emptied himself that we might have come to be, his body broken that we might eat and be filled, his blood shed that our bodies and souls might be preserved unto everlasting life, he is in these "nearer to us than our own soul."

Perhaps, prayerfully, one could contemplate the unthinkable and rejoice in God's always remaining present in man's domain--and without crowding man in the least. One might endure the worst sufferings serene in the sweet consolation that God is an everpresent help in trouble, a friend who suffers also with us and in us--unless it should come to him that no matter how lowly one's own cross, God's is still lowlier; and yet God remains God. Do not friends hold all things in common? But God's infinitely distancing himself from himself for the sake of his creation admits of no comparison; and so blessed is the man who can refrain from becoming offended at this.

Christian spirituality consists in the negating of two occasions for offense: the first is in the relation between man and God in that man is not God; and secondly in the relation between God and man in that God became man in order that man might participate in God's life.

Praying without ceasing has functionally for its object the stability of ourselves in God. But we are middle creatures who are drawn both to him and to the world; and until we consent to his remaining the Unconditioned who nevertheless unconditionally empties himself that we as middle creatures might participate in his life we shall always be trying to go beyond where we have not yet begun.

Whether we try to absolutize Christianity or secularize it, it makes a difference of no account since in either case we shall remain offended. Whether we collapse anxiety into finitude by confusing the spirit of man with man's being; whether we collapse anxiety into love by confusing love of neighbor with love of God it is all of no account since in each we overshoot the mark and go on offended.

In this "our time," when the word 'relevance' is shouted from every pulpit in the land and agonized over in every committee devoted to promoting the social gospel perhaps both sermons and good works would not fail of their ideal objectives if before God we bound ourselves fast both to the simple Gospel and the sure word of Scripture. As for the first and ontological offense Chinese spirituality sagely counsels us in the Book of Changes, that the danger of heaven is that we cannot climb it. And as for the offense of the Cross the God-man says lovingly, "Blessed is he who is not offended in me."

In this "our time" we have only to turn our faces prayerfully to our Lord the Spirit if we desire a sound and efficacious beginning. We have this treasure in earthen vessels not for plundering or manipulating but "to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (II Cor. 4:7). And when we tempt ourselves to think that the work of the world requires that we overturn and empty these vessels for the power they contain it will help if we remind ourselves that in always

prayerfully consenting to behold the glory of the Lord with our faces unveiled, we shall be changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (II Cor. 3:18).

Allan W. Anderson
Associate Professor
Department of Philosophy
San Diego State College