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Healing the Rift Between Theology and Spirituality: Theological Commentary on Chatlos's Framework of Spirituality

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There is often an unnecessary relationship of mistrust between theology and advocates of spirituality. Theological misgivings about a spirituality that is independent of religion focus largely on concerns about what the word *spiritual* means; questions about how spirituality relates to religion; concerns about an overemphasis on subjective experience in the framework of spirituality (FOS); the question of whether there are external influences on religious and spiritual experience; and the prospects for interdisciplinary work on spirituality between theology, science, and philosophy. I suggest that the FOS is less nonreligious, as often assumed, but rather stands in a distinct quasi-religious tradition, and that internal and external influences on spiritual experience should not be regarded as alternatives. My hope is that there will be more fruitful dialogue between theology and the FOS, though that depends on a better understanding of the nature of the various disciplines involved and respect for their various core assumptions.

I have been asked to provide a theological commentary on the theme of the forthcoming Institute on Religion in an Age of Science conference, "Spiritual Experience Framework of Spirituality," and in particular on the programmatic article by J. Calvin Chatlos, published here in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. The issues raised are interesting, important, and potentially controversial. The focus on spirituality, and spiritual experience, evident in this article is in tune with the wider shift in society from religion to spirituality, on which many social scientists have commented. However, it is a shift about which many theologians have reservations and concerns, which is what I will focus on here.

I will first try to locate where I am coming from. I partly share the enthusiasm for spirituality that is evident in Chatlos's article. However, I am also aware of, and have some sympathy with, the critique many theologians would want to offer. I am myself not quite in either camp, but a fellow traveller with both, wanting to improve communication between these two very different approaches. I would like theologians to take the shift to spirituality in society more seriously than they often do, and to be more sympathetic to it. I would also like those, who are advocating such a shift, such as Chatlos, to do so in a way that is more self-critical and shows more awareness of why many theologians might have reservations about their approach.

My primary discipline is psychology rather than theology, and I would say that I am a psychologist turned theologian. I received my formal theological education within the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and taught in that faculty for almost twenty years. As I approach this commentary, I am very mindful of the kind of critique my former colleague Nicholas Lash (1996) would have offered of it, particularly drawing on his book *The Beginning and End of 'Religion'*, which included an extended and incisive critique of the kind of approach to religious and spiritual experience developed by William James. I detect the influence of Lash in how another of his former colleagues, Rowan Williams, might critique some approaches to "spirituality" (e.g., Williams 2024).

I am also familiar with current social science research on those who are spiritual but not religious, and I particularly admire the work of the brilliant young Canadian social scientist Galen Watts (2022), currently at the University of Waterloo, especially in his book *The Spiritual Turn*. I have also been a lifelong admirer of the bold Christian ministry of Coventry Cathedral. Relevant to this article, I was influenced by two former Canons of Coventry: Stephen Verney (1976), particularly for his pathbreaking book *Into the New Age*, and Peter Spink, who, after Coventry, founded and led a spirituality movement called the Omega Order. Like Spink, I have been much influenced by the Austrian spiritual polymath Rudolf Steiner, a guru for some in the current spirituality movement, and the psychologist, Carl Jung. For many years, I combined my university role in Cambridge with leadership of a church in Cambridge that attracted a

congregation of whom many would say were more spiritual than traditionally religious. I would like to see mainline churches engage with such people more effectively than they often do.

I will organise my comments on Chatlos's article under five headings: the question of what the word *spiritual* means; the relationship of spirituality to religion; the framework of spirituality (FOS) on subjective experience; the question of whether there are external influences on religious and spiritual experience; and the prospects for interdisciplinary work on spirituality between theology, science, and philosophy.

What Does *Spiritual* Mean?

One of the complaints many theologians would make of the focus on spiritual experience is that the word *spiritual* is hopelessly vague and confused. That complaint is understandable, but I think it is exaggerated. In a series of publications on different aspects of spirituality (e.g., Watts 2017, ch. 8; 2024a; Dorobantu and Watts 2024), I have taken the view that, though the meaning of *spiritual* is complex, it is not impossible to say what it means.

Being spiritual has various aspects, and none of them on their own capture all of what it is to be spiritual (Watts 2017). However, there is nothing unusual about that. In a similar way, religion has various aspects, such as beliefs, experiences, and practices. Those who are spiritual but not religious often (i) have a set of assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality and about there being something more than the everyday world; (ii) have had personal spiritual experiences that have had a significant influence on them; and (iii) engage in spiritual practices, such as mindfulness or some other kind of meditation. To speak of their "spirituality" is to summarise those different facets under a single heading.

It is easier to clarify what is meant by the adjective *spiritual* when it is applied to a particular noun, such as spiritual healing (Coakley 2020; Watts 2011) or spiritual intelligence (Dorobantu and Watts 2024). When *spiritual* is applied to experience, it might refer to the experiences of people who are judged to be spiritually mature; to the phenomenology of certain experiences; to the presumed source of those experiences; or to the consequences of the experiences. Often, all of these are intended when the word spiritual is used, but sometimes the focus is just on one or more of these, not all. I maintain that is it is possible to clarify what is meant by spiritual in any particular context, though the word is often used vaguely without such clarity.

The core meaning of spiritual often involves a reference to what Robert A. Emmons (1999) calls "ultimate concerns." Similarly, Marius Dorobantu and Watts (2024) suggest *spiritual* indicates a level of depth and is concerned with the meaning, purpose, and significance of whatever is under discussion. There

is generally no clear demarcation between what is spiritual and what is not. It is rather that *spiritual* refers to particular aspects of facets of what is under discussion or considers things from a particular point of view.

The Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

There are interesting and complex issues about the relationship between religion and spirituality. The implicit assumption of many people is that there is a combined package of religion and spirituality, and that spirituality is what you are left with if religion is subtracted from the package. The debate is then about whether spirituality is best integrated with religion or treated as a stand-alone phenomenon.

Galen Watts (2022) advances a different view, which is that those who are spiritual but not religious stand in a different historical tradition from traditional religion, and that there is more to being spiritual but not religious than the subtraction theory suggests. Those who are spiritual but not religious are not just nonreligious, he argues. Rather, they stand in a different quasi-religious tradition from traditional religion and espouse a "religion of the heart" (to use a phrase popularised by Robert Bellah) with historical roots in romantic liberalism.

The debate between traditional religious people and spiritual but not religious people is then more a debate between two different religious traditions rather than a debate about whether or not spirituality should be annexed to religion. Grasping that helps to make sense of the skepticism many theologians, who are often nested within traditional Christianity, feel towards the developing spirituality tradition. They are often uneasy about it because it stands in a different religious tradition from their own.

In a fascinating analysis of cultural shifts about morality, religion, and other things, Gordon Rattray Taylor (1973) makes use of a distinction between matriarchal and patriarchal cultures, in which patriarchal cultures are more controlling and have more thick-walled ego boundaries. It seems to me that the "religion of the heart," of which Chatlos's FOS is one manifestation, belongs to a more matriarchal culture, whereas traditional religion is more patriarchal (see Watts 2013).

The interpretation of cultural movements offered by Iain McGilchrist (2009) in part two of *The Master and His Emissary* tracks similar shifts. The romantic tradition, of which the contemporary spirituality movement is one flowering, shows, in his terms, a better balance between left-brain and right-brain cognition, whereas fundamentalist religion is an extreme manifestation of the relentless trend towards overdominance of left-brain cognition in religion as in everything else (McGilchrist 2009). I suggest that traditional Christianity, with which many theologians are associated, also tends to emphasise left-brain cognition, though in a less extreme way than fundamentalism.

It is worth noting that Chatlos's article is fervent and quasi-religious, even evangelical, in tone. The religion it offers is not that of any of the main faith traditions of the world, though it draws on them. Rather, it is offering a quasi-religion of its own, and doing so with evangelical fervour. Chatlos is advocating a focus on spirituality rather than traditional religion, but he does not seem to be fully aware of the quasi-religious zeal that he is displaying in advocating that approach, nor of the historical roots of the position he is advocating.

Chatlos draws on a wide range of scientific and other literature, but it is notable that his article proceeds by a method of synthesis rather than analysis. He avoids the normal academic methodology of engaging with potential criticisms and instead chooses to build and state a particular position with confidence and conviction. He seems to be proclaiming a kind of spirituality gospel, and doing so with messianic conviction and enthusiasm. In this brief commentary, I will try to proceed with more caution.

The Focus on Experience

An important point of theological concern about the shift from traditional religion to spirituality focuses on the over-prioritisation, as theologians see it, of subjective experience. The "rationality" of religion is something on which there is a sharp divergence between religious insiders and outsiders. Religious insiders are inclined to pride themselves on the rationality of their religious tradition, whereas many outsiders regard religion as the epitome of irrationality. A key theological concern about the move from traditional religion to spirituality is that it seems to represent an abandonment of the high ground of objectivity traditional religion has tried to defend and a descent into the quagmires of subjectivity.

There is a particular theological worry about the unusual character of spiritual experience. That unease focuses partly on the emphasis on individual rather than collective experience. The assumption is that nothing much can be built on purely individual experience, whereas collective experience provides a more secure foundation (as in natural science, with its emphasis on replicability). There is a further concern that spiritual experiences are in some way aberrant or "anomalous," to use a term sometimes found in psychology (e.g., Reed 1988). Lash uses the emotive term "spook," and emphatically does not want religion to depend on spook.

The concern is thus that the shift from traditional religion to the new approach to spiritual experience represented by the FOS involves an overemphasis, from a theological point of view, on (i) purely individual subjective experiences and (ii) experiences that are spooky and anomalous and that provide a rickety foundation on which to build any secure theological conclusions. There is a track record of theologians being particularly nervous about any association between religion and parapsychology. They often seem

unable to take a dispassionate view of the evidence for parapsychology which, in my view, at least with some phenomena, is better than many people are willing to recognise (e.g., Eysenck and Sargent 1982).

Culturally, we are in a very anomalous situation. On the one hand, as Charles Taylor (1989) has brilliantly documented, there is an increasingly strong sense of self and a growing requirement in popular culture that religion and spirituality should be warm and experiential, not dry and propositional. Alongside that, as McGilchrist (2009) has documented with equal brilliance, there is a growing in contemporary reliance on objective, analytical cognition, which distrusts feelings. The mutual distrust between traditional religion and spirituality needs to be set in the context of these culture wars. Traditional religion is trying, even if not entirely convincingly, to align itself with objectivity, whereas spirituality is embracing the popular shift towards subjective experience.

There seems to have been a significant shift from late modernity onwards towards an emphasis on the experiential aspects of religion and spirituality. Accounts of the evolution of religion (e.g., Dunbar 2023) often distinguish between an earlier experiential or imagistic phase in which trance dancing played a significant role and a later doctrinal phase that developed when human beings established fixed settlements. Watts and Dorobantu (2023) note that the power and appeal of doctrinal religion is currently fading, and that there is a return to something more akin to the earlier phase of experiential religion.

I think theologians are unnecessarily nervous about a descent into subjectivity. The very distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, as currently understood, is a fairly recent one. It seems to only have been in the late nineteenth century that people started to make a sharp distinction between referential, propositional uses of language and evocative, expressive uses (Bowker 1998). That has been reflected in debates within theology about whether religious doctrine should be interpreted in propositional or in expressivist terms (Lindbeck 1984). Traditional religion has often taken a propositional approach to language, whereas the FOS is more expressivist. However, there are also those within theology, including Lash, who have refused both of those options and argued instead that doctrine is really establishing a set of grammatical protocols for how to speak, or not speak, about God.

My advice to theologians would be to abandon the attempt to defend the objectivity of theology and avoid what they see as a descent into subjectivity, and instead work to heal the split that has occurred in late modernity between objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity and subjectivity need each other. As Owen Barfield (1977) puts it rather vividly, "non-objectifying subjectivity" and "subjectless objectivity" are like two adjoining cells in a prison, and "the first step towards escape for the two prisoners of language is to establish communication with one another."

Internal and External Influences

One of the issues that concerns Chatlos is whether spiritual experience arises from inside or outside, whether it is imminent or transcendent. He claims that this debate has been settled in favour of imminence. In his introduction, he says, "Debates about the source of spiritual experience being transcendent versus immanent—outside of versus within material experience—overwhelmingly fall on the side of immanence" (Chatlos 2025). I think it is a mistake to present internal and external factors as alternatives. There is surely no doubt about the fact that internal factors are at work in giving rise to spiritual experiences, whether those are assessed by neurological measures or self-reported measures of subjective experiences. However, it is possible for both internal and external factors to be at work, interacting with each other. The disputed question is surely whether external factors are at work in spiritual experience *in addition to* internal factors. No amount of research on internal factors can settle that question.

Some might invoke a rule of parsimony and argue that because spiritual experiences can be explained in terms of internal factors it is unnecessary to invoke external ones as well—and that parsimony requires us not to do so. Parsimony has often been a helpful rule of thumb in scientific investigation, but it is no more than a rule of thumb. It does not provide evidence, or valid argument, to show conclusively that external factors are not involved in religious experience.

It might also be argued that external factors should not even be considered because, in principle, there cannot be scientific evidence for them. It is probably correct that transcendent influences on spiritual experience can never be demonstrated scientifically. However, it is possible that the claim that external transcendent factors are involved in religious experience might be true, even if that cannot ever be proved. There can be meaningful propositions, even if they are outside the scope of scientific proof.

My own view is that, all things considered, it is a reasonable conjecture that transcendent factors are involved in spiritual experience. There are general background assumptions that make this conjecture reasonable, and the arguments involved are of the cumulative case kind (e.g., Mitchell 1973). If you take a wide range of factors into account, assumptions about the impact of the transcendent on spiritual experience are not unreasonable, even if they are beyond definite proof.

In a short but interesting section headed "Transcendence vs Immanence," Chatlos (2025) suggests that "the spiritual core is associated with a dissolution of the experience and awareness of spatial boundaries," making it difficult to discern whether spiritual experiences have an internal or external origin. There are indeed various lines of evidence that suggest that an openness to anomalous

experience and permeable ego boundaries make spiritual experience more likely (Watts 2017). What I find puzzling is that Chatlos (2025) goes on to claim that "repeated experiences of opening the spiritual core eventually provide a person with an ability to make this determination and distinguish that they are coming from within." I am not sure what evidence he has for this, and it seems to me that what he says is unlikely to be correct.

However, it may be well be that, over time, people on a spiritual journey come to recognise that spiritual experience is both transcendent and immanent and straddles the dichotomy between what is within and what is without. Claims of spiritual experience are sometimes associated with a dualistic division between the material and spiritual worlds, but, as I have argued elsewhere, they equally can be associated with monistic assumptions (Watts 2024b). Interpreted in this way, spiritual is neither entirely internal nor external. It is also not a separate domain of reality but a facet of, or perspective on, a single, all-encompassing reality. It is an aspect of reality that we can only experience by participating in it, not by trying to study it as external observers.

Interdisciplinary Work between Theology, Philosophy, and Science

It is a repeated theme of Chatlos's article that he wants to see theology, philosophy, and science working together. However, I have questions and concerns about how he defines these three disciplines and about the kind of working relationship between them he hopes to see. There are no very carefully considered definitions of the three disciplines. However, in figures five and nine, theology/religion is said to be the realm of the spirit; philosophy is said to be the realm of the mind; and science is said to be the realm of the physical (Chatlos 2025). I find these to be strange and unconvincing formulations.

To start with science, there are certainly physical sciences, but there are also sciences, such as experimental psychology, that are not obviously physical. I suggest that science is distinguished more by its methodology than its subject matter. Philosophy would now normally be seen, especially in Britain, as a set of tools for analysis and argument rather than as the study of the mind, which I would see as being part of science. Philosophy includes the philosophy of mind, but philosophy does not necessarily focus on mind. There can be a philosophy of anything. I see theology as the rational reflection of faith traditions rather than necessarily concerned with the realm of the spirit. There is a theological perspective on everything, including the material, mental, and spiritual. Theology does not confine itself to the spiritual, though it considers things from a transcendent or God's-eye perspective.

I suggest that all three disciplines are better defined in terms of their methods and approaches rather than their subject matter. Chatlos's unconvincing definitions of the three disciplines undermine confidence in what he has to say

about their interrelationships. I suggest it is a central requirement of any fruitful interdisciplinary work that each discipline is accepted on its own terms. Chatlos's strong commitment to the view that spiritual experience arises internally, and not from anything transcendent, goes against one of the core assumptions of theology. So, within the FOS, theology is not being allowed to be itself; it is required to abandon one of its axiomatic assumptions in order to play the role required of it in the FOS.

Chatlos (2025) is explicitly unwilling to allow the three disciplines to make different assumptions, saying that the "definitive bridge of science with spirituality demands that science, theology, and philosophy agree on a common worldview in this overlapping area." I cannot see that the FOS is in a position to require such agreement. Starting with this requirement is unlikely to lead to fruitful cross-talk between the disciplines. I strongly recommend that the dictatorial approach of the FOS to cross-disciplinary work be abandoned. Theology can contribute to the FOS project, but it is unlikely to make its potential contribution if the FOS insists on theology abandoning core assumptions.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the current relationship between those who are enthusiastic about a focus on spirituality and those who locate themselves within the more traditional religious framework, what I hope to see is a healing of this division. In traditional religions, such as Christianity, I hope to see a stronger emphasis on the experiential component, greater emphasis given to the rich spiritual tradition within traditional religions, and a more sympathetic engagement with the prioritisation of spirituality within contemporary society. In those who are developing a focus on spirituality, I hope to see a deeper and more sympathetic engagement with the religious traditions from which the focus on spirituality emerges, a greater willingness to learn from them, and a greater recognition of the extent to which the FOS is in itself a new kind of religion rather than something that stands outside religion.

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