**Learning Together # 1: (Christian) Spirituality**

In this unit of resource material about spirituality, I’ll outline six different ways of looking at spirituality (which are by no means exhaustive!) and give you the opportunity and space to reflect on them, respond to them, and make a start on coming up with an understanding of spirituality that challenges you. The next unit of resource material will explore the distinctives of Christian spirituality.

**What is spirituality?**

1. One dictionary definition of spirituality is “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things...or pursuits”.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/spirituality> and the same site for /spiritual

1. Reachout, a secular Australian digital mental health service, develops that definition in this way:

“Spirituality is something that’s talked about a lot but is often misunderstood. Many people think that spirituality and religion are the same thing, and so they bring their beliefs and prejudices about religion to discussions about spirituality. Though all religions emphasise spirituality as being part of faith, you can be ‘spiritual’ without being religious or a member of an organised religion…

One way to understand the relationship between spirituality and religion is to imagine a game of football. The rules, referees, other players and the field markings help guide you as you play the game in a similar way that religion might guide you to find your spirituality.

Kicking the ball around a park, without having to play on the field or with all the rules and regulations, can also give you fulfilment and fun and still expresses the essence of the game, similar to spirituality in life”.

<https://au.reachout.com/articles/what-is-spirituality>

I, Bruce, would respond to that analogy by suggesting that just as there is an added dimension to football which can only be experienced in a team playing another team on the football field, so too I would suggest there’s an added dimension to spirituality when it’s expressed within the life of a community who have similar understandings of and beliefs about the world. Granted, not every experience within that community of belief will be uplifting and constructive, just as every game of football isn’t satisfying!

1. The Reachout website goes on to say:

“Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives. It has to do with having a sense of peace and purpose and feeling connected to something bigger than ourselves. It typically involves a search for meaning in life. People experience and express their spirituality for different reasons and in different ways.

Spirituality can be complex and you might feel overwhelmed or confronted, so don't be afraid to talk about it with a trusted family member, friend, teacher or religious leader. Listening to other people’s experiences and making them feel meaningful for you might help you decide what spirituality means for you...Some people might think it’s daggy to talk about spirituality, or tell you that it's a waste of time. Don’t worry about what they think; this is about finding meaning in your life, not theirs. If you haven't found what you're looking for yet, keep searching! Spirituality is a lifelong journey”.

<https://au.reachout.com/articles/ways-to-express-spirituality>

1. Wikipedia defines spirituality like this:

“Traditionally, **spirituality** refers to a [religious](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion) process of re-formation which "aims to recover the original shape of man," oriented at "the image of God" as exemplified by the founders and sacred texts of the religions of the world. In modern times the emphasis is on subjective experience of a sacred dimension and the "deepest values and meanings by which people live," often in a context separate from organized religious institutions. Modern systems of spirituality may includes a belief in a [supernatural](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural) (beyond the known and observable) realm, [personal growth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_growth), a quest for an ultimate or sacred [meaning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life), [religious experience](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_experience), or an encounter with one's own "inner dimension.”

The term [spirit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit) means "animating or vital principle in man and animals". It is derived from the Old French *espirit* which comes from the Latin word *spiritus* ([soul](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul), courage, vigor, breath), and is related to *spirare* (to breathe). In the [Vulgate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulgate) the Latin word *spiritus* is used to translate the Greek [*pneuma*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pneuma) and Hebrew [*ruach*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruach).

The term "spiritual", matters "concerning the spirit", is derived from Old French *spirituel* (12c.), which is derived from Latin *spiritualis*, which comes from *spiritus* or "spirit".

The term "spirituality" is derived from Middle French *spiritualité*, from Late Latin "spiritualitatem" (nominative spiritualitas), which is also derived from Latin *spiritualis*.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirituality>

1. Sandra M. Schneiders, Professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California writes in an academic way thus:

“Spirituality is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence… the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives…First, spirituality is not simply spontaneous experience, however elevating or illuminating, but a conscious and deliberate way of living. It is an ongoing project, not merely a collection of experiences or episodes. Thus, lived spirituality is often referred to as one’s “spiritual life,” ...Second, the project is not self-enclosed but orients the subject beyond purely private satisfaction toward the ultimate good, the highest value, that the person recognizes, which may be God but might also be something other than God…Third, the ultimate value functions as a horizon luring the person toward growth. Hence, the spiritual life is intrinsically dynamic…this definition allows us to disqualify as spirituality negative life-organizations such as addictions (no matter how all-consuming they might be), exploitative or aggressive projects that seek the good of the individual at the expense of others or the rest of creation (no matter how energizing such a project might be), or venal concerns with money, power, or pleasure.”

Schneiders, Sandra M. *Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality*, IN: The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality; Arthur Holder (Ed); Oxford, 2005 pp 16-17

1. Finally, Rowland Croucher, Australian founder of John Mark Ministries, which has been so helpful to some of us in our Poatina journey, writes about spirituality that:

“The Eastern Orthodox prefer to call it ‘mystical theology’ which is defined as ‘loving knowledge’-- or wisdom or knowledge that found through love (William Johnston)”

Croucher, R, *Recent Trends among Evangelicals;* John Mark Ministries, Heathmont, 1986, p. 58

**Suggestions for reflection and discussion:**

1. Which understandings of spirituality provoked you to new understandings?
2. What did you find yourself disagreeing with?
3. What encouraged you? What did you find helpful?
4. If you wanted to explain what spirituality was to ‘a person in the street’ in Cressy or Longford, how would you do that?
5. What would you like to add to our discussion about spirituality as a guiding principle for Poatina?
6. How might spirituality help us to achieve our goals?
7. How might this guiding principle be put into practice:
   1. personally?
   2. corporately?

Bruce Dutton, February 2018