Szilveszter Füsti-Molnár

"As a deer longs for flowing streams…."

- The Challenges of Postmodern Spirituality for Protestant Theology and the Church –

Introduction

> *Often as I recall the past, I am astonished by the threshold experiences of revival that have formed my life more than I was aware. These include - as I remember - sacred places and the inadequacy of any fixed place or institution in spite of their overwhelming forces. I remember my great heroes who could never quite fulfill their promises. I remember my expectations during disconcerting moments of transition and movement in my life. I remember wonderful findings with deep appreciations. Expectations of being found by God! These were moments beyond a transitory state. These formed wonderful appreciations of discovering the work of the Holy Spirit in my life while learning the limits of my expectations….*

This paper might be seen as a cautious step forward toward the introduction and recognition of the theme of postmodern spirituality, as a major challenge for the church and its theology today. The special focus of this paper is in the wider analysis of a comparison of postmodern spirituality and Christian spirituality, especially within the scope of reformed church ecclesiology.

In the last few decades spirituality has become a leading theme in the social sciences. It is on the agenda in theological debates but is also influenced by the different approaches to spirituality outside of the boundaries and bases of religion. On the one hand, one must consider the meaning of spirituality outside of the realm of religious and theological understanding, while on the other hand, the interrelation and interdependence of spirituality and religion (theology) also need to be considered. A theological clarification of (Christian) spirituality is needed on several levels. In this way a sense of direction might become clearer in the unfocused state of becoming lost in the Mystery of God, as seems to be happening in our so called postmodern age.

Firstly, this paper aims to introduce the most characteristic elements of the postmodern age and its consequences for human condition. Secondly, we make an attempt to collect the main

features of secular spirituality. Thirdly, we outline the important distinctive elements of Christian spirituality. Fourthly, we introduce the distinctive features of protestant spirituality and in our conclusion we make a suggestion for a careful step forward for reformed ecclesiology.

The Context of Postmodern Spirituality

The following brief description of postmodernism is strictly limited to the special interest of this paper. B. Latour points to the falsity of the myth of postmodernism by saying that there are direct breaking lines in cultures throughout time.[1] The concept of postmodernism itself is a very complex and obscure notion. It is complex because pluralism and relativism are its main internal parts. In spite of the often highly debated idea of postmodernity, we can mention some influential elements which are beyond question and have consequences for the life of the church as well. In order to understand postmodernism we need to call attention to the fact that its leading force is in its *flux*. It concerns not only one part of society or one way of certainty. Postmodernity has become influential for entire societies of the western world as well as for Central-Eastern Europe. Postmodernity affects society's way of thinking, acting and evaluating. It is not only the alterations in the circumstances of our life but also the understanding of the human situation itself which has become the subject of this change. However, postmodernity is uncertain because it suggests that we have a common viewpoint according to which our age is homogeneous enough to say that modernism is over.[2] We can see that western culture is very far from that uniformity.

---

[1] Latour claims that the different movements in cultures are not irreversible. He gives a number of examples from the Middle Ages to the early modern period to show that certain aspects of the late medieval theological thinking in fact underpin later characteristically "modern" ideas. B. Latour, *We have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

[2] D. Kolb, *Postmodern Sophistications*: *Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Deconstruction,[3] as a critical method, is one of the main features of postmodernism. This becomes the fertile soil for many options. We have less certainty in our existential questions but more choices. By giving up the task of a systematic construction[4] even in theology, the hermeneutical basis and identity is lost and a deformed view is created, which is close to a subjective relativism whereby one absolutizes one's own persuasion. For example, we define our conditions in relation to life or church-community, according to our own measurements. The objectivity of human rationalism is often questioned in this process, and as a result most people become suspicious of a normative interpretation of truth. Finally, the dangerous influence of these negative tendencies results in the decay of truth for society. Groothuis calls attention to the fact that spirituality should always be the basic element of objective truth.[5] A validation of the fact that spirituality would play an important role as a pillar of objective truth is not an easy task because of the rejection of universal truth by the postmodern context. Our surroundings seem to fight against such absolutes in order to liberate individual consciousness. Such opposition is due to the fact that while exercising their authority powerful institutions often hide their ideological control behind the mask of universal truth.[6]

The peculiarity of our age can be detected in its irony. "In virtually every corner of the globe human beings spin around and around, living out their lives as individuals paradoxically compelled in their 'private' lives to make choices from a range of options that are enumerated and managed by institutions they cannot see and people they never meet face-to-face."[7] The

---

[3] Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

[4] As it appears in the thoughts of Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: Post-modern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[5] D. Groothuis: *Truth Decay. Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism,* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 164-165.

[6] K. J. Vanhoozer: „Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: a report on Knowledge (of God)" in *the Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 11.

[7] Barry A. Harvery, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 2. The citation is from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology, Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 221.

same process is detectable in the Christian setting. Kärkkäinen makes an important point on the basis of Harvey, namely that in the postmodern context, Christian (traditional) church denominations are made up of a majority of those "who still call themselves Christians but their lives are distinctively secular, with the experience of God in worship and prayer not figuring very prominently in all that they do."[8]

Consequently, the postmodern context fosters an idiosyncratic and non-religious spirituality, while the ideological criticism of religion reinforces the alienation of contemporary seekers from institutionalized religion. The lack of foundations and of an integrated worldview leads to the rejection of master narratives.[9] The result is that the main characteristic of the post-modern age is the fragmentation of thought, which leads individuals to focus their attention on the present moment and immediate satisfactions. In this foundationless, relativistic and even alienated context there is often a powerfully experienced need for some focus of meaning, direction and value. No doubt this need leads too an intense interest in various forms of spirituality.

Christianity (religion) is greatly challenged by postmodernism while being part of it. One of the main struggles for institutionalized religion is that it is extremely difficult to reconcile with postmodern sensibility. Christianity presupposes a unitary worldview for which the master narrative flows from creation to the end of the world, thereby giving a solid ontological basis. Christianity makes claim to universal validity in the present and future while promising an eschatological fulfillment for personal gratification and sacrificial social commitment.

---

[8] Barry A. Harvery, *Another City*, 222.

[9] As it is assumed by J. F. Lyotrad as early as in the 1960's. See, J.F. Lyotrad: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1984), 31-37.

The Postmodern Human Condition

Faith in the development of modern science and in the progress of human accomplishments seems to have become inadequate and we have arrived in many ways at the end of trust in comprehensive systematic interpretations. People of the twenty-first century are not committed to development, objective knowledge, or to the necessity of basic truth. Today's societies in many ways ignore universal morality and absolute values in order to maintain relativity. These tendencies themselves question the understanding of postmodernism as a proper mark of an era. However it is more appropriate to point to the transitory nature of our time. We live in a temporary era between modernity and the forming of a new epoch. We are witnessing the demolition of macro- and micro-structures, which strengthens rootlessness. The most serious negative consequences are already present in people's identity-formation. Mobility and flexibility have become the main features of human condition in everyday life in globalized economically-centered societies. The social relations are falling apart,[10] which results in loneliness for most individuals. Ropolyi vividly describes this process as follows: "Postmodern personality is born in the process when the inflation of personality is taking place; such personality might become 'worldwide' but also very light."[11] Postmodernism is creating a 'weak subject'[12] and a 'fragmented-self'.[13] To use the Polish sociologist, Zygmund Bauman's phrasing, the postmodern basic life experience is the 'liquid life'[14] where there are no fixed points and thereby uncertainty seems to be permanent. In other words, being a weak subject can be a way of life strategy. Instability and conformity to the circumstances result in a mechanism for survival.

---

[10] L. Løvlie: "Postmodernism and Subjectivity," in S. Kvale (ed.), *Psychology and Postmodernism*, (London: Sage, 1992), 119-134.

[11] L. Ropolyi: "A virtuális valóság természetéről" (About the Nature of Virtual Reality), Cs. Pléh, Gy. Kampis, V. Csányi (eds.): *Az észleléstől a nyelvig* (From Sensation to Language)*, (Budapest: Gondolat, 2004.) 30-55, 52.

[12] Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, (Weinheim: VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), 316.

[13] J. Baudrillard, Jean: *The Transparency of Evil*, (London: Verso, 1993), 5-6. and M. Sarup: *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 47.

[14] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Life,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 2.

There are a number of characteristics which are strengthened as a result of the above mentioned process of postmodernism. According to Lasch's famous theory, the heritage of modern societies has a flair for becoming narcissistic.[15] Narcissists live with having multiple purposes to fulfill. The bubble of the number of choices, in contrast to what people can truly achieve, deepens the gap between the 'idealistic-self' and 'true-self'. Culture, for example through the media, makes people believe in 'great dreams' and flattering ideas, suggesting that people are able to complete their self-actualization according to the illusions of their 'idealistic-self'. Most people have to pay dearly for a false realization: people's self-esteem is overestimated and their self-realization becomes fragile and vulnerable. People always struggle with a number of deficiencies, therefore they are never satisfied, which in turn weakens their sense of responsibility in all areas of life. Due to the countless options, uncertainty in concrete decisions is a concomitant force, which often ends in half-solutions.[16] According to Fukuyama we live in the time of small personalities. "One does not have to be a hero!"[17] Postmodern people are tolerant and open for otherness. It could mean that they do not face problems, and in fact ignore them. This in turn leads to not committing oneself to a value-system. The result, we can say, is that for an average person in this uncertain world, the only certainty is the enjoyment of moments of life. Without the true meaning of life existence becomes estranged, especially with the experience of the absurdity of death, and people are left alone. Therefore what remains is not much more than the assurance of their own existence, which can only focus on the *moment.*

All together, postmodernism is an open and formless transitory 'system'. It does not show signs of a mature and complete view on the future or on humanity. It is hard to block its

---

[15] C. Lasch: *The culture of Narcissism – American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,* (London: Norton/Abacus, 1997), 31.
[16] P. Popper: *Felnőttnek lenni...a „létező" és a „készülő" ember* (Being Adult…the *Raised* and the *Growing*), (Budapest: Saxum, 1999) 35.
[17] F. Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man,*(New York: Free Press, 1992) 300.

influence because of its unpredictable nature, but when its basic characteristics are clearly seen, a number of phenomena are revealed.

The divergent use of the notion of spirituality is also due to the above mentioned postmodern human conditions, which we will introduce more in the following section.

<p style="text-align:center">Aspects of Spirituality in a Secular Context</p>

As a preliminary concern, we have to call attention to the historical fact that spirituality was not distinguished from religiousness until the arrival of the forceful pressure of secularism in the twentieth century. The (popular) disillusionment with religious institutions is often a hindrance to personal experiences of the sacred, and this deepens the break-line between spirituality and religion.[18] Spirituality has begun to acquire distinct meanings and connotations in the postmodern secular context, and Jameson calls this "heterogeneity without a norm". [19]

The spirituality which has become prominent in the secular context mostly focuses on the ego. The seekers and finders of this kind of spirituality mainly operate apart from a community. These spiritualities are very much characterized by the postmodern temptation, namely, the quest to turn away from religion and to entice people to create a self-styled spirituality of one's own. People are mainly interested in expressing themselves. Publishers and bookstores report that spirituality is at the centre of contemporary writing and reading. Workshops on every conceivable type of secular spirituality abound. Spiritual renewal programs multiply the spiritual directions. Spirituality has even become a serious concern of business executives, in the workplace, among sportsmen and in the entertainment industry.

Spirituality in the secular context can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon, referring to the adherence to a spiritual ideology without the avocation of a religious framework. Secular

---

[18]R. P. Turner, D. Lukoff, R. T. Barnhouse and F. G. Lu: "Religious or spiritual problem: A culturally sensitive diagnostic category in the DSM-IV", *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (1995), 183; 435-44.

[19] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 17.

spirituality in principle might embrace many of the same types of practices just as religious spirituality, the motivation nevertheless is different. Clearly, since secular beliefs are radically different from those found in most religious spiritual traditions, the emphasis is likely to be on practice rather than belief, and on the inner peace of the individual rather than on a relationship with the divine. Proponents make a case for a form of secular spirituality in which the motivation is simply to live happily.[20]

In the conclusion to *Postmodernism* by Fredric Jameson the contemporary moment is presented, surprisingly enough, as one of the historically unprecedented homogeneities. The postmodern, he writes, "must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace".[21] "We no longer are encumbered," he continues, "with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization".[22] This hour still has room for "new 'religious' formations," Jameson concedes, but these similar formations are utterly unrelated to 'religious traditionalisms,' which have "melted away without a trace," and they have nothing to do, either, with 'the spiritual,' which also has disappeared. The culture that remains is in Jameson's eyes "effortlessly secular": "spirituality by definition no longer exists: the definition in question is in fact that of postmodernism itself".[23]

Disorientation in the use of the definition of spirituality in the secular context is due to the postmodern mindset, namely that such a notion is possible to use without any concrete content. Therefore it is possible to accommodate anything. In that sense, one can agree with Jameson's above mentioned opinion.

---

[20] T. Wilkinson, *The Lost Art of Being Happy; Spirituality for Sceptics*. (Scotland: Findhorn Press, 2007), 207-240.
[21] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism…*, 309.
[22] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism…*, 310.
[23] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism…*, 387.

We can conclude the quest for the content of secular spiritualism by saying that some of the basic motifs are visible. At the basis we meet a considerable openness to the transcendent, also in the secular context. What can easily be misleading is that this openness can be related to anything which shakes us, either with the feeling of affection or fear.[24] The content of secular spirituality often seems to be connected to the immanent of the *seculum*, but it is labeled as 'transcendent'. Humanity itself is transcendable, whenever the goal is to go beyond our own limits. In this way it is possible to distinguish a so called smaller and greater transcendent experience. Smaller means within the boundaries of our human limits (more connected to immanent reality), while a greater is to go beyond immanent reality. The Swiss psychiatrist, Scharfetter, who is a maintainer of the modern definition of spirituality, is operating with the human consciousness under the term 'spirituality'. [25] The discovery of our own spirituality is a way of self–knowledge which leads to a higher state of self-consciousness. This means that we reach a realm of consciousness close to ultimate reality where everything is interconnected in a holistic way. Spiritual experience can therefore go beyond the individual and beyond material reality, but it is also related to these, since this experience comes alive through the meeting of empirical reality.

The secular spiritual experiences are often not more than some sort of a mystical self-acknowledgment and it would be an exaggeration to call these an experience of God. One way to help to clarify the fuzzy state of secular definitions of spirituality is to distinguish *spiritual desire*, which is clearly an anthropological aptitude, from *spirituality* which is fulfillment of that desire, when the quest finds rest in its object, the Sacred.

---

[24] D. Németh, *Hit és nevelés* (Faith and Education)*,* Valláslélektani szemléletmód a mai valláspedagógiában (Religious-psychological Viewpoint in Contemporary Religious-pedagogue), (Budapest, 2002), 164.

[25] C.Scharfetter, with R. M. Falconi, Hollenstein, M., Jacobowitz, S., Rhyner, L. Soni, , *The spiritual path and its dangers. An overview for counsellors and Psychotherapists*, (Stuttgart: Enke, 1991) 1.

Basic elements of Christian Spirituality

The contemporary postmodern views as we have pointed out in the previous section are often based on amorphous notions of self-discovery, actualization and relativism. Christian spirituality in contrast is deeply rooted in a particular historical tradition whose teachings defy moral relativism. We will limit our investigation of Christian spirituality to some of the basic principles of Scripture. The Christian theological tradition of spirituality often refers to the Pauline tradition.

The etymological root of spirituality derives from the Greek word *pneuma* (spirit, spirit of God) and connected to the Latin *spiritualis* (spiritual). In Paul's letters *pneuma* and *pneumatikos* (spiritual persons) are often used together, which deepens the meaning of the notion of Christian spirituality. This is especially true if we consider the counter part of *pneuma*, which is not *soma* (physical) but *sarx* (carnal). The Pauline use of the words clearly indicates that the contrast is not between body and soul, rather that which is in contrast with the Spirit of God, is carnal. Basically, two kinds of frame of mind oppose each other. The battle of the *sarx* and *pneuma* is not subjective but a cosmically objective phenomenon. When people say 'yes' to the demand of *sarx* they become *sarkikos*; when they follow the godly *pneuma* they are *pneumatikos*. The identity of being a *pneumatikos* or *sarkikos* is not an integral component part of human beings - rather these are outward aspects. The *soma* is the responsible person(ality) whose decision-taking must decide between the alternatives of *pneuma* and *sarx* by means of the *psyche* (life force, self-conciseness).[26] It is obvious that the understanding of Christian spirituality is impossible without God's revealed will in Scripture. In accordance with Sheldrake, one of the most important features of Christian spirituality could be expressed through *discipleship*. This is a basic element of the experience of

---

[26] Zs. Varga: *Görög-magyar szótár az Újszövetség irataihoz* (Greek-Hungarian Dictionary to the New Testament), (Budapest: Ref. Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya, 1992), 792-794, 914. P. Sheldrake: *A spiritualitás rövid története* (A Brief History of Spirituality), (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2008), 14.

conversion and becoming a *disciple* (Mk. 1, 15[27]). Obedience to the call for conversion makes the following of Jesus Christ possible. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."[28] It is important to call attention to the fact that Jesus is the one who elects and calls a person to discipleship[29]. Therefore, becoming a disciple cannot be seen as one's own initiative. The human responsibility is in the answer to God's call. The disciple can only take part in the service of the coming of the Kingdom of God if she or he radically breaks with their own past (for the sake of the Gospel). A disciple loses his own life in order to find it.[30]

Discipleship, as an important element of Christian spirituality, is more than the following of Jesus. The disciple has to unite with Christ (*unio mystica cum Christo*), because that is how unification can happen with the Father through the Holy Spirit and the Son. Paul expresses this in the Letter to the Romans by saying that one shares the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[31]

As a short elaboration of the interrelation of discipleship and Christian spirituality, it is distinctively important to point out that this process is not possible without a community. God gathers a church chosen to everlasting life[32] and by way of the unification with Jesus Christ we may become members of his church and thereby children of God[33] and inheritors of God's promises[34]. The only reason this community is one body, the living body of Christ,[35] is due to

---

[27] καὶ λέγων ὅτι Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ: μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ.

[28] Matt. 4, 19.

[29] "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last…." (Jn. 15, 16). All English quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

[30] "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mk. 8, 35)

[31] "³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." (Rom 6, 3-5)

[32] Heidelberg Catechism question and answer fifty-four.

[33] Rom. 8, 15.

[34] Gal. 4, 6.

[35] 1Cor. 12, 12-13.

the *unity* with Christ. Therefore the spirituality of such a community cannot neglect the doxological aspect in its Christian existence, which finds its roots in harmony with the times of the Old Testament spirituality, whereby the emphasis was on the remembrance of God's gracious acts in history.

So far, before turning our attention to some of the specific aspects of protestant spirituality we can conclude the following observations comparing secular and Christian spirituality.

Firstly, the anthropological and theological approach regarding the definition of spirituality is different. In an anthropological sense spirituality is openness for transcendence. That openness pervades sensation, thoughts and actions. In the religious context such an aptitude finds its object in the holy, in the divine, in God. The Christian understanding of spirituality refers to the whole Christian existence, where life is dependent on the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Secondly, the more dominant anthropologically flavored definitions of spirituality are manifested in so many forms which display a lack of focus which could give a clear orientation to life. In contrast to this, a theologically qualified spirituality, as a visible form of faith, is always an answer to God's saving acts given in Jesus Christ. In this way our life can be represented as an offering to God, no matter how harmful sinful human existence is. The following question is then raised: Is there any common ground where the two kinds of approach to spirituality may share some sort of a mutual principle, and through this one might take a careful step forward.

Some of the Main Features of Reformed Spirituality

After stirring up the different layers which have been massively unloaded on spirituality, we want to firmly stand on the truth of the *particula exclusiva* of the Reformation by which our reformed theology's *anchor* becomes more vivid. Spirituality for protestant theology

becomes sharper if one considers the doctrine of justification. In this doctrine a clear distinction is made between the acts of God and human deeds, which have led to a emphasis on *sola gratia* and *sola fide* since the time of the Reformation. Salvation is an act of God alone. Human deeds cannot contribute to it. With the issue of spirituality therefore, clarification is needed about how faith and spirituality are connected. To avoid soteriological misunderstandings one needs to radically distinguish pious living (*praxis pietatis*) from faith. In earlier protestant theology *praxis pietatis* ('piety') was the terminology often used for the concept of 'spirituality'. The question how faith can be manifested needs to be answered. Faith manifests itself by its fruits which are not limited only to the liturgical forms of the worship services but pervade everyday life as well - according to the teachings of reformed theology.

The specialty of protestant, Reformed spirituality, flourishes from these above mentioned criteria and stands on the pillars of '*without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self'*, and on the creation as *theatrum gloriae Dei,* as well as on the *unio mystica cum Christo* -as is expressed in Calvin's thought - which we now aim to introduce briefly.

As a preliminary concern, we have to call attention to the fact that the twenty-first century's gospel does not differ from what we can find in the Holy Scripture: before any human attempts to find God, God became human (prologue to the Gospel of John). God's grace (*sola gratia*) is found in his irrevocable revelation in Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*). This is the starting point from which people can respond with praiseful life devoted to him. The principle of *solus Christus* identifies the disorientation of postmodern spirituality and the causes of insecurity in life.

Without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self

In order to gain existential security by way of protestant spirituality, it is worth turning to Calvin's word at the beginning of the *Institutes*[36]: "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself [*sui notitiam*, which also includes all mankind and all creation] unless he has first looked upon God's face, and than descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself."[37] Calvin also makes it clear by emphasizing: "we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety".[38] His understanding of piety is "reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces".[39] Calvin straight forwardly comes to the conclusion in accordance with Lactantius (*Divine Institutes*) that "no religion is genuine unless it be joined with truth"[40] Therefore any other kinds of attempts to know God "are merely toying with idle speculations".[41] Further, "the pious mind does not dream up for itself any god it pleases".[42] When someone truly starts to know God, then such a "pious mind…immediately betakes itself to [God's] protection, waiting for help from him"[43]. God's truth is inseparable from Jesus Christ (*solus Christus)*. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" - cites Calvin from John 1, 17[44] and also declares when explaining the third commandment: "for thus we confess him to be eternal and immutable truth"[45]. Christ is the source of truth and wisdom, and Christians grasp that truth through faith, which is a gift from the Holy Spirit.[46]

---

[36] Calvin's theological masterpiece, *The Institutes*, are not only a *summa theologica* but also a *summa pietatis* according to the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536). Calvin describes his book in the subtitle of the 1536 edition as "encompassing almost the whole sum of piety [*pietatis summam*] and whatever necessary to know about the doctrine of salvation, a work *most worthy to be read by all who are zealous for piety*" (emphasis mine).

[37] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.2., 37.

[38] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.2.1, 39.

[39] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.2.1, 41.

[40] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.4.3, 50.

[41] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.2.2, 41.

[42] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.2.1, 42.

[43] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.2.1, 42.

[44] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*2.7.16, 364.

[45] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*1.8.23, 389.

[46] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.2.6, 548-49.

Theatrum Gloriae Dei

The thought of the whole creation as the *theatrum gloriae Dei* is another important element for spirituality in Reformed theological thinking as based on Calvin. In this way one may widen the circle of the understanding of Reformed spirituality. Calvin's application of the metaphor of *theatrum mundi*, in contrast to many centuries' tradition in the western thinking and culture[47], gave an almost uniquely positive meaning to the world as theatre of God's glory. Susan Schreiner points to the fact that the concept of the *theatrum gloriae Dei* cannot be disconnected from Calvin's understanding of *falling in sin*.[48] According to Calvin's thoughts, due to the fall of humanity the world is fragile and is on the edge of chaos. Only God can save the world from its immediate collapse. "The Spirit of the Lord attracts everything, it all lapses back into nothingness" and "the stability of the world depends on the rejoicing of God in his work" – as Calvin puts it in his commentary on Ps.104, 5-6. [49] The providence of God (*creatio continua*) saves the world and the *protagonist* of this monumental *drama* is God himself. The contemplation of God means seeing God's majestic glory through nature's wonderful scenes as well. Therefore Calvin also makes it clear that without the *eyes* of faith the native human capacity to grasp the significance of God's performance in the world remains blind.[50]

As the whole created world is *theatrum*, all *performers* are designated to glorify God's wonderful beauty. On the huge stage of the *theatrum mundi*, a unique place is given to the *church*. Among the performers this special community should be the one for whom the *drama* is most clear. The community of the church in its form of worship receives the *drama* of God

---

[47] The metaphor of the 'world as theatre of divine glory' was mainly used to illustrate human life's vanity and the failure of human tasks. (See for example: Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Chrysostomos, Augustine, or Ficino)

[48] S. Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory,* (Grand Rapids MI: Bacer Acedemic, 2001), 22-28.

[49] Henry Beveridge (edt.): *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Vol. IV.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 148-149.

[50] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*2.2.26, 286-287.

in a most appropriate way, since God calls the church to be the first recipient of God's revelation.

Unio mystica cum Christo

The most import foundation of the Christian human existence is the union with Christ, the *unio mystica cum Christo.* Calvin calls attention to this in the *Institutes*: "First we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us."[51] Community (*unio mystica*) with Christ is more than just belonging to him. It is more than the 'covenantal relationship' and the following of him. Calvin on the basis of Scripture talks about "engraftation in the body of Christ".[52] "The same purpose is served by the sacred wedlock through which we are made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone [Eph 5, 30], and thus one with him."[53] The truth we can participate in is the truth of Christ; consequently it is not faith itself which holds the truth.[54] The *unio mystica cum Christo* should be comprehended as a spiritual unification which is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Calvin carefully explains the unification with Christ, keeping in mind the ascension of Christ's human nature as well. When we think of union with Christ we must recognize that there is no mixing of the human and the divine 'essences' and that such communion does not happen among equal partners.[55] Calvin was consequent about this teaching in his interpretation of the sacraments as well.

On the basis of Calvin's thought, the following conclusion can be drawn about reformed spirituality and postmodern spirituality:

---

[51] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.1.1., 537.
[52] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.2.30., 576.
[53] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.1.3., 541.
[54] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.2.10., 554.
[55] J. Calvin, *Institutes…*3.11.10., 736-738.

Firstly, human openness (by necessity) to the transcendent is not only an anthropological aptitude but since it belongs to our created nature there is no doubt that it points to our humanity's dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, one of the major features of protestant spirituality is the fact that God's acceptance of humanity is unconditional. People can do nothing for their salvation. In contrast, other kinds of non-religious spiritualities are not aware of the necessity of salvation for humanity. The principle of *sola gratia* secures us from the disorientation of finding the Sacred through our own merits. Spirituality in protestant understanding is not an *aim* but a *consequence*.

Thirdly, while postmodern spirituality promises the illusion of the unification with God, reformed spirituality becomes most concrete in the existential meeting with God through his revealed Word. Here one can find another specialty of protestant spirituality, namely the importance of the preaching of God's Word. In this way it also becomes obvious that God's saving plan for humanity does not exclude human consciousness.

Fourthly, protestant and especially reformed spirituality is Trinitarian. All of reality refers to the one God who revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Faith which comprehends God also includes the whole world as the creation of God. That becomes very clear in Calvin's interpretation of the world as the *theatrum Gloria Dei*. Humanity is liberated for responsible work in the world. The One Triune God, whose most characteristic nature is the love relationship among the equal members, gives us an inspiration about how to transform the church and society.

Conclusion - a Careful Step Forward for Reformed Ecclesiology

Having shown many differences in the motivations between Christian, especially protestant, spirituality and postmodern spirituality, we end up with three different basic

models concerning the connection of religion (church) and spirituality. The first is that spirituality is alienated from religion, where one may speak of two different entities. The second is when a certain kind of spirituality becomes a rival or even an enemy of religion. The third is when spirituality and religion are each others alternatives.

It would be easy to conclude that religion just as well as the institutional church may provide an appropriate context of spirituality. But one cannot overlook the facts of the first two models. The church in the world has a responsibility concerning how it operates through its institutional influence. It is possible to abuse its power, as we see in a number of examples in the history of Christendom. Institutionalized religions may empty tradition by many means: for example through rituals which have no content, clericalism, corruption, abuse of power, and also by concentrating only on the expectations of their contemporary context. These phenomena are often the root cause of people's distrust towards the church. When the church falls into these errors it often happens that instead of the values the church should concentrate on, the church only focuses on itself. When an authentic Christian life-program and spirituality are not distinguished from the mistakes of the institution, there is often a general rejection of the church. The time of the reformation is a positive example of how to start solving such problems, but one can also learn from the extremes of that time that the church can end up falling into exclusivism.

The institutional church's existence is a paradox and the realization of that can help us avoid radical extremes or indifference. For the interpretation of this paradox in regard to our ecclesiological considerations, it can be useful to introduce the notion of 'thresholds' - or *liminality*, which is borrowed from the science of anthropology. Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner described the transition involved in rites of passage by means of the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'threshold'.[56] This concept describes the experience of movement involved in

---

[56] Cf. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (London : Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) and Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94-130.

having left one place, especially one conventional state of being, and not yet having arrived at another – so that one is "betwixt and between". Such threshold experiences force one to question old identities and entertain new ones, standing in the doorway like the Roman god, *Janus* and looking in two directions at once. We believe that a juxtaposing of conflicting identities is very much also part of the exercise of faith. Nowhere is that exercise made more possible than in threshold experiences of *liminality*. And such experiences are also realities of the paradoxical existence of the church on its pilgrimage (*in via*) in the world. We can explore more fully the implications of this for the spirituality of the church by shortly referring to four characteristic elements as revealed in Scripture.

The first conviction is that God is a God free in his omnipresence, and can never be comfortably contained in any place. Yahweh dwells in thick darkness[57] far beyond the control of those who fix the holy into secure and accustomed structures. God is always essentially beyond knowing, and beyond being placed. There is however a tension in this kind of theology by the very mystery of revelation itself. The God who can be located by no one is nonetheless made known by the free acts of God's own self-placement. (For example in Eden, the burning bush, Sinai, the tabernacle and the temple.) A biblical dialectic persists between placement and freedom, iconic and non-iconic experiences of God, or 'temple theology' and the theology of a boundless God.[58]

The second conviction is that the *liminal* experience of being in transit forms a primary metaphor of the encounter with God. "Turning around", the process of *metanoia* often occurs in situations of displacement or transition. It is on the marginal ground between places and beliefs held certain, that the Spirit of God may come with overwhelming power. One can think about Paul's conversion experience on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus. Or we can also refer to the story of the Ethiopian minister of finance as he was met by Philip

---

[57] 1Kings 8, 12.
[58] Cf. W. Brueggemann, *The Land,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). Also look at 2 Samuel 7, 4-11 and 1Kings 8, 12-61.

while traveling south from Jerusalem on a chariot, and they discussed the prophet Isaiah. The story ends with the Ethiophian's request to be baptized.

A third conviction is that biblical faith will always demand an identification with the marginal, unplaced peoples of this world. One's *liminal* experiences necessarily make one sensitive to disposed and uprooted people everywhere, and will allow entertaining personal connections unimagined before. Biblically this understanding is deeply rooted in the experience of Israel as a displaced people – the memory of their journey through the wilderness, their encounter with exile. This means that their pleas for justice invariably included a particular concern for those who had been victims of dislocation. The homeless, especially widows, orphans, cities of refuges, the precepts of the year of Jubilee are all illustrative examples of that.

The fourth conviction touches upon the heart of *liminal* spiritual experience. This is the forsakenness of Jesus Christ on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[59] Liminality appears between the "my God" and "why have you forsaken". Jesus suffered that tremendous sense of abandonment, of separation from the Father, precisely in order to re-unite all human beings to God, as they were detached by sin, and to re-unite them to one another. Jesus did not remain in the abyss of that infinite suffering. With unimaginable, immense effort he re-abandoned himself to the Father ("Father, into your hands I commend my spirit")[60]. Jesus gave example for how to face the most varied forms of disunity, separation and abandonment: he opened the way to overcome them and he gave the deepest meaning to the mystery of unity.

We believe that the above considerations, in light of the labyrinth of postmodern spirituality and its many threshold experiences, may open (re)new(ed) perspectives for

---

[59] Matt. 27, 46.
[60] Luke 23, 46.

reformed ecclesiology in the contemporary context where Christian spirituality may flow more freely in the fulfillment of the God-given task for Christian existence and the Church.

> *… as I see now, I am on the threshold often torn by strong hesitance. I am at once somewhere in a liminal stretch of memory, beyond the limbus of my well-ordered world, still recalling the strange half-places of yesterday - "but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect".*

Address:

Füsti-Molnár Szilveszter
Sárospatak
Kazinczy út 9.
3950
Hungary

Email: fustis@t-online.hu

Szilveszter Füsti-Molnár is an ordained pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church. He is an associate professor at the Systematic Theological Department of the Sárospatak Reformed Theological Academy.