

# Spirituality and Literary Studies

Paul T. Corrigan

**Teachers today are comfortable with class discussions about almost any topic — except spirituality. It is time that that changed.**

On the whole, teachers and scholars have gotten pretty comfortable talking about almost everything, including violence, sex, and politics. Often these topics are discussed in great detail and in quite personal terms, yet some are still decidedly *uncomfortable* talking about religion and spirituality. In some cases there even seems to be an unspoken rule that religion and spirituality are taboo in the halls of education, unless they are analyzed in a strictly detached way. Cornel West (1991, 547) has observed, for instance, “that the history of black studies in the United States has been one in which music and religion have played a very, very small role, even though black religion and music play a fundamental role in the history of black people.” Of course, as a recent report from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2008) reminds us, religion and spirituality, whether musical, liturgical, contemplative or otherwise, play a fundamental role in the history of most people. So it makes sense that some, like Deborah Hooker, feel that “acknowledging spirituality, in all the myriad forms in which it might exist for people, ought to be part of the conversations we have in ‘the academy’....”

My intent in this essay is to make a case for integrating spirituality into academics. Those of us who would like to draw openly on our spirituality in our academic work ought to be able to do so with skill and respect. In making this case, I will deal specifically with my own field, literary studies, and I will use perspectives and examples from my own spirituality, rooted in the contemplative Christian traditions. This will allow me to draw on what I know, and readers will be able to decide whether what I have to say is applicable to their own situations, their own academic work, and their own awareness, experience, and beliefs.

At a minimum, it is important to acknowledge spirituality in literary studies because so much of literature deals with religious or spiritual topics. In



PAUL T. CORRIGAN teaches writing and literature at Southern University in Lakeland, FL. He has written on contemplative teaching for *Pedagogy* and *The Teaching Professor*. He has also written on poetry and spirituality for *Literature and Belief* and *The Annual Volume for the College Theology Society*.

many cases, it is overt, as with Rumi's poetry, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, or Mary Oliver's *Thirst*. In the title poem in *Thirst*, for instance, Oliver (2006, 69) tells God: "Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart." Literature also deals with spirituality indirectly, invoking transcendent themes without necessarily referencing religion. In one of our conversations, Deborah Hooker (1990) put it this way:

Literature studies just beg for [discussion of spirituality] because the really good writing touches on something larger than ourselves — a mystery, perhaps, but a very fecund mystery.

Moreover, some people understand spirituality as integral to the process of meaning itself, and therefore integral to the meaning of all texts.

Another reason why it is important to discuss spirituality in literary studies is that we are limited by our own subjectivity and by our personal histories and contexts. Whether unashamedly or unwittingly, writers and readers allow their traditions, experiences, and beliefs to inform their work. Acknowledging our spirituality or absence of spirituality is simply a matter of intellectual honesty. More than that, we should realize that those things that limit us are also resources that we can draw on. I consider my spirituality to be closely wound up with the impulses, contexts, and purposes of my literary studies, and I consider my teaching and scholarship an integral part of my life as a whole. My academic work simply cannot really be kept separate from my spirituality. Beyond merely acknowledging spirituality, I want to integrate it into my work in open and personal ways. By integrating our spirituality into our work openly and intentionally, we can also do it critically and mindfully.

A growing number of scholars and teachers on the margins of the field have quietly been doing just that. Books like John Booty's *Meditating on Four Quartets* (1983), Parker Palmer's *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (1993), bell hooks' *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), and quite a few articles in the journal *Spiritus* all explore spiritual/academic integration. Similarly, the scholar Cheryl Walker (1998, 166) admits in her essay on "Reading Elizabeth Bishop as a Religious Poet"

that "I actually want to [read] Bishop because of the interest a religious person might take in her work." Rickey Cotton (1989, 2010) has shown that spirituality pervades literature and life, and he makes the case that we ought to be able to discuss it sensitively in our classrooms. Daniel Sartin (2008) introduced spirituality in his high school English classroom by inviting his students to share in two minutes of silence after reading about Zen Buddhist literature in their textbooks.

Finally, perhaps a sign of broader changes to come, two recent issues of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (2005, 2009) have explored spirituality in higher education. Works such as these provide useful precedents and models of writing and teaching about literature in ways that integrate spirituality. But these ways of writing and teaching still break the taboos of the dominant academic style.

### Spiritual Experience

Feminist scholars have much to offer to the discussion of integrating of spirituality and academics. The feminist emphasis on personal experience becomes particularly pertinent when we realize that part of the personal is the spiritual. Writing and teaching that aim to integrate spirituality will certainly share much of the vision that Adrienne Rich (1972, 18) outlines in the beginning of her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," a vision of integration leading to new life:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped us as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see — and therefore live — afresh.

Such writing and teaching will certainly be different from most work done in the dominant academic style, whose rules Olivia Frey (1990, 509) lays out neatly in her essay "Beyond Literary Darwinism: Women's Voices and Critical Discourse":

The conventions of mainstream literary critical writing ... include the use of argument as the preferred mode of discussion, the importance of the objective and impersonal, the importance

of the finished product without reference to the process with which it was accomplished, and the necessity of being thorough in order to establish proof and reach a definitive (read “objective”) conclusion.

Feminist scholars often resist this dominant style by making room in their own writing and teaching for their subjectivity and humanity. Sometimes they do this through experimenting with external forms of scholarship like narrative or autobiographical criticism. More importantly, though, they make space to attend to their motivations, to the human impulses that underlie their work, and to the processes they undertake in reading and writing. As Nancy Sommers (1993, 425) writes in her essay “I Stand Here Writing,”

At the outset, many of my students think that personal writing is writing about the death of their grandmother. Academic writing is reporting what Elizabeth Kübler-Ross has written about death and dying. Being personal, I want to show my students, does not mean being autobiographical. Being academic does not mean being remote, distant, imponderable. Being personal means bringing their judgments and interpretation to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind even when they write academic essays.

We begin to integrate our spirituality into our teaching, reading, and writing when we allow our past experiences to inform our reading and allow our reading to inform our past experiences. We go even further when we bring our *selves* to the texts for new experiences.

Thomas Merton, monk, poet, and public intellectual, connects literary experience with spiritual experience in his essay “Poetry, Symbolism, and Typology.” Though he writes specifically about religious poems, what he says is applicable to spiritually integrated criticism and teaching in general:

The experience which [religious poems] convey, and which the reader must try to share, is not only a poetic but a religious experience. Religious poetry — as distinct from merely devo-

tional verse — is poetry that springs from a true religious experience. (1985a, 328-329)

Whether or not we want to consider some poems spiritual and others not, the useful idea here is that spirituality plays out in and through the experience and process of writing and reading. Writers try to “convey” experiences, and readers try to “share” them. When Merton speaks of religious experience in this, he does not necessarily mean something particularly extraordinary, but only something associated with an awareness of the transcendent. Even a moderately sublime literary experience, a poetic moment of heightened awareness, can be a religious or spiritual experience. Integrating spirituality into our work will mean paying attention to and being intentional with these dynamics.

In another essay, “Why Alienation is for Everyone,” Merton (1985b, 382) describes a writing process that includes extensive free association, drafting, discarding, rewriting, and silence. He writes that “rather than making an intellectual point and then devising a form to express it, we need to release the face that is sweating under the mask and let it sweat out in the open for a change....” If we consider reading and writing as extensions of each other, this applies to both. Through free association, drafting, discarding, and rewriting, we stage an interaction between literary texts, academic texts, and our *selves*. By helping us pierce through our routine assumptions about the world, practices like these (which also happen to be advocated by the best of composition theory) can lead to spiritual, literary experiences and to honest, original criticism.

Particularly when silence is part of our reading and writing process, we can make ourselves present to the text and present to the spirit beyond the text. This kind of silence, which is intentional, spiritual, and very different from the *silencing* of the oppressed, can cut through the constructs and stereotypes that society feeds us and that we feed ourselves. Silence has long been an artistic and spiritual principle, say, for haiku writers and monks. Henri Nouwen (1991, 56-57), a contemplative priest, writes that

a word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from the silence and returns to it.... Words can

only create communion and thus new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge.

Thus, with something like this kind of silence in mind, Mary Oliver (2006, 26) writes:

I know a lot of fancy words.  
I tear them from my heart and tongue.  
Then I pray.

Parker Palmer (1993, 117) explains that “in silence the rational mind wearis of seeking truth by main force and humbles itself to the truth that seeks us.” Spirit and truth are both beyond language. Silence allows us to take into account the relativity and constructedness of all particulars while holding onto hope of a transcendent absolute. For those of us in Christian traditions, for example, that transcendent truth is in Jesus. Thus Nouwen (1991, 48) suggests that “we can even say that words are meant to disclose the mystery of the silence from which they come,” and T. S. Eliot (1982, 27) writes:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come  
upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God.

Practices of silence and practices of language infused with silence may become central to our teaching. These practices bring our whole selves, our whole personal and spiritual selves, into our academics and into presence with each other and with the texts we read.

### Spiritual Discourse

Questions of truth, justice, and humanness are at the heart of spirituality. But because of the histories of oppression, violence, and opposition to free thinking associated with religion and religious discourse, we must ask what the integration of spirituality and literary studies has to do with the critical conversations about, for instance, gender, race, and class. In one way of looking at it, religious discourse has forced itself out of academic discussions through exclusionary binaries like in/out, saved/lost, heaven/hell and through epistemologies of monolithic certainty that close down the possibility of dialogue. Because many traditions simply can’t be “toned down” without being essentially altered and because there are ways of being spiritual without re-

ligious trappings, we might integrate spirituality into our academic discussions by welcoming only those spiritual perspectives that are safe, generic, and without, say, cosmologies of hell. In many situations, this may be the best thing to do in order to maintain a welcoming environment for teaching and learning. But we should also keep in mind that excluding specifically religious spirituality amounts to another layer of marginalization for many people who are already categorically marginalized.

For example, Cornel West (1999, 547) explains that many black scholars avoid their religious roots because they are afraid “that any association with black religion [will make] them look bad in light of the secular orientation of their white colleagues.” So we ought to look for ways to allow spirituality and religion into academic discussions that avoid oppressive discourse and foster authentic dialogue. Several possibilities come to mind.

First, because spirituality can be such a sensitive issue, teachers must be proactive about creating and maintaining a safe environment in their classrooms. Power arrangements and peer tensions in school settings complicate matters, and most students will be unfamiliar with incorporating spirituality into discussions. Parker Palmer (1993, 81) points out that spirituality “must be introduced cautiously.” bell hooks (1994) recommends that instructors carefully lay out guidelines for discussion, explain their theories and motives, and be open to questioning and dialogue. Students must feel that their beliefs and traditions or lack of beliefs and traditions will not leave them open to abuse and will not influence their grades.

Secondly, we can speak and write and teach our students to engage one another in generous and non-oppressive modes, such as *self-reflection*. By this, I mean using spiritual traditions as mirrors rather than grenade launchers. In the Christian tradition, for example, it seems clear that Jesus intended that his teachings be applied self-reflectively rather than by pointing fingers at others. Another mode is *dialogue*. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, contemporary theologian Miroslav Volf (1996) explains a process of embracing the other and letting go, allowing the other to be other but not *utterly* other, and not allowing the self to remain utterly the same. Still another mode is

the prophetic. As Walter Brueggemann describes in *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001), the prophetic mode involves giving the lie to the ideologies in power by expressing suppressed grief about death and injustice. This leads to spiritual hope. By laying out proper parameters and using such creative modes of expression, spirituality can be integrated into literary studies in ways that work against oppressive systems, avoid dogma and coercion, and maintain diversity.

### Conclusion

Practically speaking, the integration of spirituality and literary studies will be realized among small pockets of interested students and teachers. A group of students may meet to talk about a short story and then relate their personal beliefs and experiences to its themes. Teachers and students might read a poem out loud and then sit without talking in presence of the poem and of one another. Scholars might sift through fragments of an author's work to look for wisdom rather than to impose a thesis. Quietly but surely such scenarios are in fact already playing out.

Olivia Frey (1990, 524) concludes her essay by "talk[ing] about love and end[ing] with a prayer." I would like to do the same thing with a few lines from Mary Oliver. In the poem "Praying," Oliver (2006, 37) describes the type of criticism and teaching I believe is important:

just  
pay attention, then patch  
a few words together ... this isn't  
a contest but the doorway  
  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

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