

CURA VITAE: THE HERMENEUTICS OF SPIRITUAL HEALING AND THE BEAUTIFICATION OF LIFE

Daniel Louw

Department of Practical Theology & Missiology
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

In the social and healing sciences the notion of a holistic approach in human health is a well-established concept. In care-giving an interdisciplinary model is inevitable. However, what is the contribution of a Christian spiritual approach to human health and healing? It is argued that the human soul (nephesh) is a relational concept embedded in the concrete existential realities of life. The methodological background is an existential philosophical analysis of our being. A pastoral hermeneutics is developed that takes the unique dimension of an eschatological approach to healing into account. In order to help pastoral caregivers to 'see' the bigger picture, a diagram is designed that could assist the pastor to make a pastoral diagnosis in order to understand better the spiritual dimension of human health. Spiritual healing is in the first place an aesthetic category (the meaning, purpose, value, destiny and quality of life) and not a moral issue about good and bad, benevolence and evil.

Key Words: Christian Spiritual Health and Healing; Pastoral Hermeneutics; Philosophical Analyses; Spiritual Maturity and Wholeness; Integral Spirituality; Theological Aesthetics

To my mind a comprehensive approach to life should refer to the existential realities of daily experiences and the demands posed by happenstances and different encounters within the reality of suffering and death. The intriguing question in all of these demands is the question of meaning, namely what is the suffering in suffering? The suffering in suffering is actually about the poignant question: Why me? In terms of S Kierkegaard's existential approach to life problems, it boils down to the following: choice and attitude. "We don't get to choose what talents we have but we are responsible for the attitude we take in life" (*Kierkegaard's Pastoral Dialogues*, adapted by Pattison & Jensen 2012:6).

With hermeneutics is meant the attempt to interpret life events and existential realities within the mutual interaction between the Biblical text and the human text within the concrete context of daily events. With existential is meant: elements and structures of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1963:41-4); different modes of how human beings live in a world threatened by anxiety and death. Existential is about structural realities that determine the quality and meaning of human life.

The following six existential issues demarcate to my mind the existential reality of human suffering. They constitute a kind of existential framework for the burning question in suffering: 'Why me?' How one responds to them determines spiritual health. An inappropriate response contributes to pathology: i.e. the "illness of the human soul". They can even become a threat to our being human and transform the beauty of life into the ugliness of 'hell'.

They are:

- Anxiety: the fear of rejection and the threat of loss and isolation;
- Guilt and shame: being haunted by past transgressions, the threat of irresponsible decision-making and the painful acknowledgement: I have failed;
- Despair: severe doubt, despondency and the threat of non-sense and desperate hopelessness;
- Helplessness: the inability to cope and the threatening possibility of total loneliness;
- Anger: frustration and the threat of unfulfilled expectations, inappropriate role functions and the disappointment of unfulfilled needs emanating in violent and aggressive behaviour.
- Greed and the insatiability of human desires and the tendency to exploit life and other human beings.

What then is meant by the healing of life in terms of purposefulness and a sense of meaning? Can the Christian faith be connected to these existential realities in such a way that, in terms of reciprocity, spirituality becomes a source for healing and a meaningful interpretation of life? How can a Christian spiritual hermeneutics assist human beings in their attempt to link the existential realities of life to a source of hope that can instill a sustainable courage to be?

Mature Faith and Human Wholeness

In pastoral terms, one is healthy when one has a source of faith that enables one to live with meaning and hope. This means that mature faith behaviour reflects a certain understanding of God that enables a meaningful life. By 'mature faith' is meant the congruency between that which one believes of God (content) and how one acts in the awareness of God's presence (witness) and responds to the challenges set forth by the existential realities of human suffering.

In pastoral care we need to start speaking of 'human wholeness'.¹ The reason for this is that health in a biblical sense points to life and salvation (the verb *sozo*, to save). In a *comprehensive approach to health*² the use of the term spiritual healing could perhaps be too narrow. One might even speak of 'faith healing', 'divine healing', 'miraculous healing' or 'charismatic healing'. However, the reference to spiritual healing refers to wholeness and a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the soul, *nephesh*, which includes embodied life as experienced within the presence of God, as well as within a cultural system and network of social human relationships. As a result of the predominantly synthetic thinking of the Old Testament, *basar*, flesh, the bodily function is not conceived as something separate from the *nephesh*. Embodiment and soulfulness are complementary categories.

¹ The notion of wholeness is very popular in the literature on healing but it is a very vague and slippery notion. Lamb *et al.* (2001:60-69) discuss the two meanings of wholeness: comprehensiveness and integration. Wholeness also implies coherence and intactness, continuity and adequacy. Self-knowledge and 'loving knowledge' also play a role. While *wholeness* refers to the healing dimension of interconnectedness, the concept 'hole' in a *holistic* approach refers to different parts as related and connected to the entire picture and network; to the whole unit in all of its dimensions and functions.

² For a holistic approach to health, see Collins and Culbertson 2003:1-7. It is important to note that modern psychiatry came to the realisation that the spiritual aspect is just as important a component of the total person as are the mind and the body.

Healthy people in the Old Testament were people who expressed the quality of fullness and wellbeing of life as represented by the notion of *shalom*, peace. It refers to complete fulfilment and is connected to moral activity, spiritual achievement, righteousness (*sedeq*), faithful fulfilment of the covenant and the *torah* (holiness), obedience to God and the law, blessing, fertility and longevity (see also Wilkinson 1998:11-16). These concepts, within a comprehensive understanding of health as wholeness and wellbeing, refer to a positive state of complete fulfilment and a sense of destiny as it emanates from God and his will for a humane life with dignity and righteousness (spiritual aesthetics). Health includes right relationships.

This comprehensive understanding dovetails with the New Testament's understanding of health and healing. Several concepts are relevant in this regard.

Wilkinson (1998:22-29) discusses the use of the concept *hugies*, which means having the quality of soundness derived from a proper balance of the whole being: "The significant point is that both *shalom* and *hugies* coincide in expressing the idea of soundness or wholeness of a person's being which is the essence of health" (Wilkinson 1998:22).

In this regard *eirene* describes a state of peace or tranquillity as opposed to war or disturbance. *Zoe* refers to health as a constructive way of living, the quality of life, while *bios* and *psuche* generally refer to our common human life lived under the conditions of time and sense, which begins with birth and ends with death. When transferred to God, life points to eternal life and trust in the faithfulness of God. *Soteria* indicates a condition of redemption as the outcome of justification – i.e. "being saved and sound" – and deliverance (freedom from evil and sin).



Traditional depiction of Christ as the "saviour of the world" (freedom from evil and sin). Spiritual healing means more or less to be delivered from sin. The basic presupposition for spiritual healing is remorse and confession of sins. In chapel of the convent: Casa Pastoral Maria Inés Teresa Arias, San José, Costa Rica.

Picture: DJ Louw, 2013

From a theological point of view one can conclude that, as a comprehensive category, health refers to a state of being that can be described as *shalom*, peace (Long 2000:14). According to Long, in *shalom*, or health, our relationships with God, one another and the environment are at peace. He concludes: *shalom* is experienced in a right relationship to God; it is experienced communally; it is experienced in a very special way within the family system and should be expanded to the whole of creation. *Shalom denotes fullness of life.*

According to Pilch (2000:4-15), the healing stories in the New Testament and the notion of *shalom* should be interpreted in their cultural context. When one compares the notion of

healing in an ancient narrative with the notion of healing in, for example, a Westernised and Americanised global context, different perspectives surface. When applied to the American context, healing is more about doing, individual need satisfaction, future success and achievements, the attempt to master and control, and the pursuit of happiness (what is good). In the New Testament being is more primary than doing. Collateral relationships constitute the primary value orientation. Group goals are therefore preferable to individual goals. Both the past (tradition) and the focus on everyday life in the present are important. Life should be lived, not managed. Part of the reality of everyday life is the interplay between good and evil.

The discussion of the different concepts of health in both the Old and New Testament helps one to understand that a spiritual approach to healing in pastoral care is paramount, thus the following question: What is meant by 'spiritual healing'?

Spirituality in the Field of Healing

'Spirituality' is a buzzword in today's world and almost any scheme for self-realisation claims to be promoting 'spirituality' (Stevens and Green 2003:x). There are different understandings of what is meant by spirituality, and various religious traditions describe spirituality in different ways. Confession, church polity, communities of faith and their traditional customs, national issues, dogmatic issues, rituals, cultural settings and environmental context all play a pivotal role.

McGinn (1993:21), in an extensive volume on the history of Christian spirituality, points out the difficulty of formulating a final definition of spirituality. Several related concepts surface immediately, for example, *pneuma*, *pneumatikos*, and in Latin *spiritualis* and *spiritualitas*.

Spirituality relates to devotion and piety. If one hopes to understand biblical spirituality, one needs to note that some of the most fundamental concepts in Scripture are (in order of priority): godliness; holiness; mercy; charity; compassion; maturity, and perfection (Waaajman 2003:315-317).

Wainwright (cited in Yarnold 1986:9) describes Christian spirituality as the combination of praying and living. It is this embodiment of prayer in life that the New Testament writers describe in such phrases as 'a living sacrifice,' and 'spiritual worship' (Rom 12:1).

Spirituality is not merely about inner feelings; it is about a human person's integration and coherence as an experiencing and acting person (Thayer 1985:13).

Biblical spirituality is social spirituality as well. It is spirituality of the kingdom of God, of a pilgrim people. Spirituality is progress towards maturity. The emphasis is not on inner peace and adjustment, but rather on movement and pilgrimage. In the spiritual progress of which the New Testament speaks, the centrality of love is emphasised, in contrast to knowledge or mutual enlightenment (Leech 1986:9-10). Christian spirituality is an indication of hope. Moreover, spirituality is an indication of how faith is incarnated within our daily existence (Seitz cited by Rubbach 1987).

In one way or another, spirituality is related to faith and the experiences of faith, while God-images also come into play. This is why Bouyer (1982²:vii-ix), in writing about the history of Christian spirituality, says that spirituality concentrates on those human acts in which the reference to God is not only explicit but also immediate. Spirituality concentrates on both religious experiences and religious exercises.

Another common element is spirituality as a *lived experience*, referring to the function and impact of the content of faith or belief systems on religious experiences. This is why

McGinn (1993:21) describes spirituality as a vivid and lived experience of the Christian faith. It refers to the impact of faith (as directed towards and by God) on the religious consciousness of people as well as on their religious praxis, the motivation and intention of acts and practices of faith. Stevens and Green (2003:x) define spirituality as our lived experience of God in the multiple contexts of life. This experience of God enables humans to discover the transcendent meaning of everyday life, including our work, relationships, and life in the church and world.

This awareness of God leads to two actions:

- Firstly, it results in prayer. This is communion with God and the focus is then on growth in faith.
- Secondly, it results in charitable deeds of love within society. The focus here is on renewing and changing the structure of the political environment. The piety of pious inwardness makes space for the piety of pious outwardness: the sanctification of social practices within human relationships.

The renewed interest in spirituality reflects our yearning for significance and the transcendent dimension in our lives. This transcendence should not only impart meaning to our lives, but it should also be ‘practical’. Thus spirituality is linked directly to experiencing God’s presence in the world and practising the Christian faith (Oates 1986). For Benner (1988:103) Christian spirituality implies involvement with life. He describes spirituality as “the response to a deep and mysterious human yearning for self-transcendence and surrender” (Benner 1988:104).

Integral Spirituality

Attempts are made increasingly to link spirituality to the quality of our being human. Spirituality thus becomes a term which links, as well as constructively integrates, a psychological understanding of maturity with a theological understanding of maturity. Of paramount importance to this link is the notion that spirituality should be understood in terms of human relationships.

In *A Practical Theology of Spirituality* Richards (1987:244) uses the definition: “True Christian spirituality is living a human life in union with God.” Spirituality is experienced within human relationships. He discusses seven human issues in Scripture and links them to the individual and corporate aspects of Christian faith (Richards 1987:245).

| Human Issue | Individual Aspect | Corporate Aspect |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Identity | Responsibility | Accountability |
| Intimacy | Prayer | Worship |
| Sinfulness | Confession | Forgiveness |
| Lordship | Choice | Freedom |
| Mortality | Suffering | Compassion |
| Holiness | Morality | Justice |
| Commitment | Discipleship | Servanthood |

Spirituality is actualised when Christian faith is linked integrally to our being human. The general conclusion of an inter-disciplinary study on spirituality points in the same direction:

Christian belief discloses a further human reality, and so it also offers a further explanation of the human (Helminiak; 1987:165).

Spirituality should lead to an integration of the various aspects of being human (Dorr 1990²). An integrated spirituality should improve the quality of human dignity. The presence of God in a person's life should contribute to life's meaning and humanity. It should link the inner and the private dimensions to the external dimensions of public life and our social context. Spirituality is actualised when Christian faith is integrally linked to our being human.

In order to conclude one can say that the concept of spirituality refers in general to the following:

- The spiritual realm of the unseen as connected to transcendence and an awareness of the ultimate.
- In our current age of information technology and the computerisation of life, a new dimension of spirituality and transcendence is emerging. Within the realm of cyberspace and the infinite options of virtual reality through simulation new dimensions for spirituality are opened up for the creation of significance, for example, *cyber spirituality* and *virtual spirituality* – the spirituality of simulation. Because of the role of film and the media, this dimension of spirituality should be taken into account when one is dealing with the healing of life.
- Spirit and soul, indicating that faculty in our being human that can transcend the physical limitations of mind, brain and body. It represents the transcendent dimension of the psyche and of life.
- The connection between our human quest for meaning and the realm of norms, values, commitments, life views and belief systems (integrative factor).
- The connections between human beings and their understanding or interpretation of a supreme being (deity), which one can call 'God'.
- Practices and rituals expressing the different dimension of faith; liturgies and structures for different modes of worship.
- The specific characteristics of faith as institutionalised in official documents, confessions, structures of worship and denominational functions.
- The promotion of the quality of life through ethical codes and aesthetic imagination.
- An awareness of the presence of God or an X-factor in daily living; the beyond-ness of life and its relatedness to the Ultimate.

With reference to the notion of 'spiritual healing' in the tradition of the Christian faith, a mature faith and spirituality in pastoral care and counselling denote more or less the same subject (that is, grace and salvation). However, spirituality points more in the direction of the experiential and operational dimension of faith (the lived dimension of faith). Spirituality is linked to the notion of wisdom in Scripture and operates within the realm of the will of God. It functions in close association with justice and therefore has an ethical and social dimension.

Spirituality reflects the quality of a personal stance in the presence of God. It reveals a condition and a mode of conduct, which indicates the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of God. It therefore determines the identity, significance and destiny of the human 'I'.

My personal emphasis for a theological understanding of Christian spirituality and its implication for the healing ministry will be on the *eschatological perspective and its impact on human identity and on the significance of our being functions*. Hence the importance of a theology of affirmation in a psycho-pastoral model, which takes seriously the interplay between a pastoral anthropology and an existential understanding of maturity.

Spiritual Healing: A Theological Perspective

In this section I wish to advocate for a theological interpretation of healing which takes a comprehensive approach to human wholeness from the perspective of Christian spirituality. In this regard the following theological perspectives are relevant:

- Spiritual healing as a *new state of being*: healing represents the fact that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).
- This is a shift from sin into the eschatological realm of redemption and salvation;
- Spiritual healing as a *new state of mind*: peace. *Shalom* describes a contentedness with God and life. “For he himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14);
- Spiritual healing as a *new attitude and way of doing and living*. “Live by the Spirit ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:16; 22-23);
- Spiritual healing as *wholeness, purposefulness and direction*.

“For in this hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24).

Cura vitae: Towards an Existential Approach in Christian Spiritual Healing

Spiritual healing with its dimensions of peace (*shalom*), healing (*habitus*) and wholeness (*telos*, meaning) should take place within the realm of existential, life issues. Thus the emphasis on an existential approach.

With *cura vitae* is meant: life should be healed. Healing in Christian spirituality is not merely the healing of a private human soul detached from the body, the existential realities and the ecological environment. Healing is a comprehensive concept. With a holistic approach to healing, Christian spirituality should deal with the cosmic implications of the work and death of Christ as well. Both life and soul should become ‘whole’.

Colossians I:15-17 refers to Christ as the image or icon (*eikōn tou theou*) of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. The argument is an inclusive approach to healing, grace and salvation: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible....and in him all things hold together”.

The cosmic implications of the salvation in Christ are not new in Christian history. The Christian tradition had often referred to Christ and the crucifixion as a ‘tree of life.’ For example: in the library of the Latin American Biblical University, San José, Costa Rica I came across the following depiction of Christ as a ‘Tree of life.’



Christ and the cross as a tree of life; a healing source for the whole of the cosmos.

Permission: library of the Latin American Biblical University, San José, Costa Rica. Note the depiction of the fall above the cross and the destruction and violence of war at the foot of the cross. As one faces the painting, on the right hand one can see how people are benefitting from the crucified Christ: they start to live and to enjoy the fruits of life.

Picture: DJ Louw



I found this crucifixion in the chapel of the Latin American Biblical University, San José, Costa Rica. The cross is depicted with many symbols of life representing the culture of Costa Rica. Life is therefore incorporated in the mediatory work of Christ. Within the cross there are depictions of elements and objects playing a role in the daily living of the people.

Picture: DJ Louw, 2013

A decisive argument for a theological and holistic understanding of Christian spiritual healing is that it should have a direct and meaningful impact on the following *existential realities* of life. To my mind the following existential realities describe the impact of human suffering on the human quest for meaning:

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of anxiety*, i.e. the fear of being rejected and isolated within the dynamics of human relationships. The core issue in anxiety is the fear of loss – loss either due to past events or a possible loss in future. Linked to this existential threat is a perhaps inappropriate response. Such an inappropriate response can be called a kind of spiritual pathology or illness which causes an extreme experience of anguish. Faced with the reality of death the anguish leads to dread and severe forms of distress. Within human relationships anguish and dread are often the consequence and result of destructive prejudice and suspicion. Human beings are often killed in their identity when prejudice leads to *discrimination* (judgemental selection on the basis of biased and skewed social forms of negative exclusion emanating in marginalised social isolation) and *stigmatisation* (inhumane labelling as negative devaluation and existential disqualification of unwanted qualities).

In this regard our basic existential need is *intimacy*: the need to be accepted unconditionally for who we are without the fear of rejection. Intimacy points to the need for human dignity and positive acknowledgement within the dynamics of human relationships. Spiritual healing in this regard means to discover amazing grace: “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). Grace refers to the theology of unconditional love. It presupposes the notion of the faithfulness of God. Rather than the concept of a remote God, faith then operates with the intimate understanding of God as the covenantal Partner for Life who displays his compassion within the realities of our human suffering. Such a God is a Compassionate Suffering God; He suffers with us. He is not necessarily the cause *behind* our suffering but the comforting God *in* our suffering.

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of guilt and shame*. Both are linked to either experiences of failure or an awareness of human sinfulness: one fails in the light of norms, values, customs or established laws for prescribed human behaviour.

Guilt and feelings of guilt from our past have the potential to destroy identity and self-esteem in the present and future orientation. Due to conscience one can be torn apart and haunted by images of self-punishment and temptation. The German concept of *Anfechtung* describes this kind of inner torment, self-accusation and agony. Our basic existential need here is *to be set free* and to be liberated from the past. The need for liberation, freedom or deliverance sets in. In order to deal with the past in a constructive way it is paramount for human beings to disclose and to face the truth of one's existence. In cases of unjust treatment and an exposure to oppression there is the need for emancipation in order to move from disorientation to a new and different orientation. Spiritual healing in this regard means forgiveness and reconciliation. "He forgave us all our sins." (Col 2:13-14). "God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor. 5:18). The notion of the replacement, Christ in our place and his mediatory work of salvation and justification, sets us free: all our guilt is deleted. "For he has forgiven us all our sins; he has cancelled the bond which pledged us to the decrees of the law. It stood against us, but he has set it aside, nailing it onto the cross" (Col. 2:14). The point is: he cancelled the unfavourable record of our debts by nailing it to the cross.

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of despair, despondency and doubt*. Deprived from all forms of hope, the loss of future orientation leads to regression and eventually the downward spiral of despondency sets in. One is then deprived of any meaningful source to continue with life (the courage to be).

To be exposed to meaninglessness and voidness can rob one of hope. Instead of excitement about life, life turns into a nightmare; one starts to resist life (nausea). Life becomes meaningless, often with suicide (existential negation) as the only exit from this purposeless boredom. Our basic existential need is *anticipation in hope*. The whole of our human identity latches onto a sense of meaningful, future orientation. Spiritual healing in this regard means trust in the faithfulness of God and the discovery that our being functions is anchored in the fact that despite our disturbed affective condition and negative mood swing, our identity is an ontological fact. The fact that we are already a new being in Christ provides the foundation for steadfastness and the courage to be. This is the reason why Paul confirmed his affirmation in Christ on the basis of grace and resurrection hope: "However (despite the fact of his monstrous birth and bloody, violent past), by God's grace I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:9). Paul's whole existence was thus determined by hope. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Spirit" (Rom 15:13).

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of helplessness and vulnerability*. It is in loneliness, that one becomes aware in a much intensified way of human transience; life is but a fleeting moment.

People often become emotionally sick because they remain helpless victims within the different networks and structures of life (cf. the HIV epidemic). Sometimes one becomes so emotionally exhausted that the depleted self cannot cope anymore without support and assistance. Our basic existential need is for a functional and available – but also viable – *support system*. Spiritual healing in this regard means the discovery of

koinonia or fellowship, i.e. the church as the body of Christ. “If one part suffers every part suffers with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). This is the time when somebody should step in on behalf of the vulnerable and, by means of intercession and prayer, act on behalf of the other in order to empower.

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of disillusionment, frustration, anger and unfulfilled needs*. Behind many acts of aggression and anger, lurk experiences of disillusionment and disappointment due to unfulfilled needs and expectations that have not been met in a meaningful way.

Anger is an expression of frustration due to unfulfilled needs. Needs are shaped by many contextual issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor housing and living conditions, violence and crime. The extreme expression of anger is aggression and violent behaviour. It is often exposed in the abuse of power. Anger, when it is fuelled by ideology and irrational belief systems, is often the hidden background to destructive behaviour and can even lead to religious fanaticism. Our basic existential need is *life fulfilment*, a fulfilment of life expectations. The experience that one’s life is fulfilled creates intense moments of joy, happiness and pleasure. Spiritual healing in this regard is related to the removal of destructive factors that compromise human dignity, justice and human rights as represented by the norms, values and ethical framework of the Christian faith. In this regard the guarantee of the faithfulness of God to our being human plays a decisive role. This faithfulness of God is expressed in a very poignant way in the victory of God over the most hampering factor and stumbling block in life: death. “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). In Christian spiritual care life fulfilment is indicated by two spiritual categories: *gratitude* and *joy*. Gratitude³ refers to *eucharistia*, good grace. Gratitude is the awareness that one’s human identity is not established on the basis of any human merit or performance. It is established and affirmed by the faithfulness of God alone. Joy refers to the fact that I am a ‘charismatic person,’ endowed, equipped for life, as well as empowered by the Spirit of God. Every aspect of life then becomes ‘sacred’ pointing to the vivid presence of God; life becomes sacramental in the sense that it is enjoyed as a free gift of God’s grace – thus the reason why the liturgy of the church should actually be designed to celebrate the goodness of God’s creation.

- The *existential suffering (reality) and threat of greed and insatiable desires (boredom)*. For human beings it is difficult to set a limit to their needs and desires. If desires are fulfilled in a materialistic way, insatiability in a materialistic society of profit and money-making often leads to the suffering of boredom. It seems to be part and parcel of our nature never to be satisfied, to abuse, and to exploit. Within a market driven economy and the global pressure on consumption, we are exhausting all natural resources and endangering life on this planet. This is the reason why EM Conradie (2012:13) advocates for an integrated view of the environment and the notion of an ecological theology. “The word *oikos* is also the etymological root of *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited world. ‘Ecumenics’ therefore means treating the inhabitants of the household as a single family, human and nonhuman together, and fostering the unity of the family.”

³ “A life of faith is a life of gratitude – it means a life in which I am willing to experience my complete dependence on God and to praise and to thank him increasingly for the gifts of being. A truly eucharistic life means always saying thanks to God, always praising God, and always being more surprised by the abundance of God’s goodness and love” (Nouwen 2000⁴:3).

One can say that the whole of the cosmos is exposed to a kind of cosmic yearning for modesty and healing in order to address ecological issues. There is an urgent need for the preservation and conservation of natural resources. Our basic need is indeed the promotion of *human welfare* and the creation of a worldwide philosophy for a *sustainable livelihood* in order to address global issues such as famine and poverty.

Although often regarded as too managerial, androcentric and Eurocentric (Conradie 2006:128), the theological notion of stewardship becomes most appropriate. Stewardship can be linked closely to the ecological command in Genesis 1:28 to 'control' the earth. The translation of control is very misleading. It does not mean dominionship in the sense of exploitation. The Hebrew actually refers to the sensitivity of a shepherd, caring for his flock. It does not imply aggressive abuse, but loving care. The ethos of loving care is linked closely to wisdom, i.e. to reckon with the presence of God in the whole of cosmos in every moment of responsible decision-making. In order to transcend greed by care, one needs the ethos of humility. In a theological ethics we are guided by the principle of sacrificial ethics and not of unlimited exploitation and consumerism.

The following table is a schematic summary of a comprehensive and existential understanding of healing and indicates what is meant by *cura vitae* in spiritual healing. The diagram depicts the unseen issues that determine our human quest for meaning; we start to 'see' the difference between 'beauty' and 'ugly' in life. Within a pastoral diagnosis, the diagram functions as a kind of 'bigger picture' that can help the pastoral caregiver to understand the connection between the spiritual realm of healing and the existential realities of daily life; existential realities that determine the quality of our basic being functions.

| LIFE & SUFFERING Existential realities | LIFE & PATHOLOGY Spiritual illness | LIFE & MEANING Spiritual needs | LIFE E & HEALING Spiritual sources |
|---|--|---|--|
| ANXIETY & DEATH Fear of loss <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • isolation • rejection • <i>derelictio</i> | DREAD & DISTRESS Prejudice & suspicion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discrimination • stigmatization | INTIMACY & DIGNITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acknowledgement • acceptance | GRACE & COMFORT Theology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faithfulness of God • compassion of God • God as covenantal partner for life |
| GUILT & SHAME <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • failure • sinfulness | TEMPTATION & AGONY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-punishment • <i>Anfechtung</i> | TO BE SET FREE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freedom • liberation • emancipation • disclosure • confession | FORGIVENESS RECONCILIATION & JUSTICE Theology: cross & justification |
| DESPAIR & DOUBT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dependency | NAUSEA & FUTILITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • purposeless • meaningless • negation | HOPE & COURAGE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anticipation • identity | SALVATION & ESCHATOLOGY Theology: Resurrection & <i>parrhesia</i> |
| HELPLESSNESS & LONELINESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vulnerability | VICTIM & INFERIORITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • depleted self | SUPPORT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empowerment | FELLOWSHIP & INTERCESSION Theology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>koinonia</i> • <i>diakonia</i> |
| ANGER & FRUSTRATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disillusionment • aggression | VIOLENCE & ABUSE OF POWER <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oppression • fanaticism • irrational belief systems | FULFILMENT & HAPPINESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • joy • pleasure | SACRAMENT & GRATITUDE Theology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>eucharisteia</i> • <i>leitourgia</i> |
| GREED & DESIRE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insatiability • dissatisfaction (need-satisfaction) ▪ boredom | EXPLOITATION & CONSUMERISM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • famine • poverty • physical yearning | HUMAN WELFARE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conservation • preservation | COMMANDMENTS & STEWARDSHIP Theology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wisdom • sacrificial ethos • humility/ modesty |

With reference to the above ‘picture’ and graphic design, one can conclude that spiritual healing and the beautification of life entails the following components:

▪ *A Hermeneutical Understanding*

Insight in how the different existential issues are interrelated creates a kind of illumination: one starts to ‘see’ the bigger picture. One starts to see how the existential realities of suffering are linked to existential needs. It helps one to understand the connections between suffering, spiritual needs and possible existential and spiritual pathology. The bigger picture helps one to understand what is going on. Healing is not so much about a solution and answer, but more about attitude, vision, commitment, conviction, meaningful interpretation and realistic insight.

▪ *Spiritual Networking*

Spirituality is not anymore an abstract kind of idea regarding the meaning and purpose of life. Christian spirituality, with its basic theological principles, is now connected to the existential realities and needs of life; spirituality is a concrete, existential life issue. The spiritual process of existential networking transcends the artificial schism and dualism between life and faith. Faith becomes a vital element of our daily existence. When, for example, the content of faith (grace) plays a paramount role to create a sense of intimacy (I am accepted unconditionally for who I am, without the fear of rejection), Christian spirituality infiltrates and penetrates the realm of anxiety and brings about another option to dread and the eventual danger zones of discrimination and stigmatisation. The anxiety will not necessarily disappear; however, the Christian belief system provides an address for the anxiety: it can be connected to the faithfulness of God. It is in this sense that the Biblical text comforts and brings about spiritual healing. The Bible is not anymore a kind of elastoplast on the wounds of life, but a source of healing in the sense that it helps people to articulate existential issues by means of the fulfilled promises of the Word of God. Christian faith then plays a vital role in the process of naming life issues. For example, the depleted self is often classified under the heading of depression. In fact the experience of depletion and spiritual fatigue is in essence a lack of understanding of what is going on; it is often more about an inappropriate response to painful life events and the fear of loss and rejection, than a major depression. What is called a 'marriage crisis' is often more about a lack of understanding what love is about and a result of disappointment due to unfulfilled needs and unrealistic expectations, than a crisis of separation and lack of love. Appropriate naming, reframing and seeing the connections between the different existential realities of life, helps the believer to discover meaning in life and provides a source of spiritual healing. Life starts to become 'beautiful'. Spiritual networking is intrinsically about spiritual aesthetics.

▪ *Reframing and Change*

Healing is about change. With change is then meant to 'see' the same event from a different angle and perspective. Healing implies a kind of 'perspectivism'. Spiritual illness and pathology set in when one's vision becomes distorted and one-sided. The links between the existential reality, the spiritual need and the spiritual source, help us to discover possible alternatives. The anxiety is then not so much about the loss and the fear of rejection, but about fixed ideas, rigid behaviour and a fear of change; however, the loss can also be seen as an opportunity for change and growth. The emotional experience gives the message of dread, distress and meaninglessness. The perspective of faith provides a message of support and trust when even the physical evidence points in an opposite direction.

▪ *Hope and Vision*

Seeing the bigger picture is already an existential form of hope. To discover the link between the existential reality of suffering and the knowledge of one's basic need for intimacy, freedom, hope, support, fulfilment and human welfare, is to discover vision. One starts to anticipate something new and different in future. The spiritual dimension provides stability and continuity within the discontinuity; it fuels new orientation despite the disorientation. To understand that hope, from a Christian perspective, is not about wishful thinking but about trust and confidence, is to provide a sense of stability. The fact is: hope is not opportunism or positive thinking. Hope is about positive being.

The Christian hope is not about an optimistic stance in life. It does not provide an alternative to pessimism. Hope is an ontological category. It describes a new state of being and a new state of mind. The fact that, in terms of the eschatological reality of salvation and justification, one is a new creation conveys the message of ontological change and qualitative transformation. The ontological fact that a human being is transformed in Christ from the realm of darkness into the realm of light; from being a 'thorn tree' into being an 'olive tree', is already about ontological and existential hope. Due to the fruit or *charisma* of the Spirit one is now recreated into a new being. For example, love is now a constituent of being; one is love and goodness and kindness and friendliness. This is one's new character. This 'charismatic constitution' describes a Christian spiritual reality that establishes identity and dignity. To discover our pneumatic reality in Christ is to hope. And this amazing discovery is what one can call the peace brought about by spiritual healing.

The gist of my argument to promote a theological aesthetics is that spiritual healing occurs when the above-mentioned existential threats can be linked to the following spiritual components:

- *Intimacy*: to be accepted unconditionally for whom you are without the fear of rejection; the need for love;
- *Deliverance*: to be liberated from the transgressions of the past in order to be set free; the plea for freedom;
- *Hope*: to anticipate something new, for change and transformation in order to set new goals for meaningful future orientation;
- *Support*: to have reliable structures that can help and assist one to cope with the demands of life;
- *Fulfillment*: to experience a kind of acknowledgement, satisfaction or happiness that kindles gratitude.
- *Human welfare*: to create a sustainable livelihood that cares for the preservation and conservation of the whole of the cosmos.

Discovering the link between the existential needs and spiritual sources, can be called the beautification of life. The hermeneutics of spiritual networking constitutes a kind of spiritual aesthetics of healing. It even contributes to a very specific confession within the tradition of the church: I believe in the resurrection of the body. I Corinthians 15:43: "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable".

Theology as the Aesthetics of Healing

The challenge to Christian spirituality is to link our understanding of God to the above-mentioned existential areas. The argument thus far has been that in order to heal life, our God-image should be transformed. This theological endeavour implies a paradigm shift. The 'idea' of a theistic cause-and-effect principle (*arché*), as well as a metaphysical understanding of an immutable God should shift to the 'idea' of a passionate and theopaschitic God (the suffering God). The passion of God's co-suffering, God's compassion, links the human existential predicament of vulnerability to the following spiritual and Christian realms, which one can call the healing dimension of salvation.

What then is meant by the "beauty of God"? God is beautiful due to the following divine characteristics conveyed by the encounter between God and human beings:

- The intimacy of grace: God's unqualified and unconditional love as expressed in a covenantal encounter and steadfast faithfulness; the promise: "I will be your God".
- The total annihilation of guilt by means of forgiveness and reconciliation: the freedom of justification.
- The anticipation of something totally new, the future not as forecast or wishful thinking (future as *futurum*), but future as *adventus*, namely the eschatological realm of a new creation: hope as a new state of being and a different state of mind and attitude. Life is then determined by sacrificial ethics and not by achievement ethics.
- The support system of the fellowship of believers: the *koinonia* of the church as the caring body of Christ.
- The liturgy of the sacraments: the Eucharist of spiritual gratitude, the baptism into a new life and the worship within the realm and space of amazing grace: gratitude as the beauty of the Christian praxis in daily living. This sacramental space of a liturgy of life (wisdom) creates a qualitative experience of life fulfilment and spiritual joy.



*Depiction of Eucharist
from Moshe, Tanzania.
Private collection,
DJ Louw*

In Christian spiritual care the aesthetics of life fulfilment is indicated by two spiritual categories: *gratitude* and *joy*. Gratitude⁴ refers to *eucharistia*, good grace. Gratitude is the awareness that one's human identity is not established on the basis of any human merit or performance. It is established and affirmed by the faithfulness of God alone. Joy refers to the fact that I am a 'charismatic person', endowed, equipped for life, as well as empowered by the Spirit of God. Due to the festivity of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the whole of life as represented in the bread and wine become sacramental; every word and gesture. Soul is then a sacramental category.

Life and all actions, even talking and communication, become sacramental in the sense that they refer to the realm of grace and unconditional love. Thus the reason why Paul warned in Ephesians 4:29-31 against 'unwholesome talk'. One should only articulate what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit (literally: to give grace) those who listen. Instead of bitterness, rage and anger, one should be kind and compassionate.

⁴ "A life of faith is a life of gratitude – it means a life in which I am willing to experience my complete dependence on God and to praise and to thank him increasingly for the gifts of being. A truly eucharistic life means always saying thanks to God, always praising God, and always being more surprised by the abundance of God's goodness and love" (Nouwen 2000⁴:3).

- Stewardship: in terms of Romans 8:19 the whole of the cosmos is in yearning and in pain, awaiting a kind of 'spiritual healing'. It is therefore a challenge to the church to heal the earth and to become aware of what one could call a 'green spirituality'. With reference to Genesis 1:28 human beings received a divine calling to take care of the cosmos in the same way as a shepherd cares for his flock.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benner, DG 1988. *Psychotherapy and the Spiritual Quest*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Bouyer, L 1982. *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers. A History of Christian Spirituality*. Volume I. London: Burns and Oates.
- Collins, GB, T Culbertson 2003. *Mental Illness and Psychiatric Treatment. A Guide for Pastoral Counsellors*. New York: The Hayworth Press.
- Conradie, EM 2006. *Christianity and Ecological Theology. Resources for further Research*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.
- Dorr, D 1990. *Integral Spirituality*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Heidegger, M 1963. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Helminiak, DA 1987. *Spiritual Development. An Interdisciplinary Study*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.
- Jensen, HM, G Pattison 2012. *Kierkegaard's Dialogues. Adapted by HM Jensen & G Pattison*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.
- Lamb, WH *et al.* 2001. 'Wholeness, Dignity and the Ageing Self: a Conversation between Philosophy and Theology' in E MacKinley *et al.*, *Ageing, Spirituality. A Multi-National Perspective*. New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press.
- Leech, K 1986. *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*. London: Sheldon.
- Long, WM 2000. *Health, Healing and God's Kingdom. New Pathways to Christian Health Ministry in Africa*. Carlisle: Regnum Books.
- McGinn, B 1993. Zur Planung des ersten Bandes. In: B McGinn *et al.* *Geschichte der Christlichen Spiritualität*. Band I Würzburg: Echter Verlag, pp. 21-30.
- Nouwen, HJM 2000⁴. *Show Me the Way*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Oates, WE 1986. *The Presence of God in Pastoral Counseling*. Waco: Word.
- Pilch, JJ 2000. *Healing in the New Testament. Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Richards, LA 1987. *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Academic.
- Ruhbach, G 1987. *Theologie und Spiritualität*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Stevens, RP and M Green 2003. *Living the Story. Biblical Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Thayer, NST 1985. *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*. London: Sheldon.
- Waijman, K 2003. *Spiritualiteit. Vormen. Grondslagen. Methoden*. Gent/Kampen: Carmelitana/Kok.
- Wilkinson, J 1998. *The Bible and Healing. A Medical and Theological Commentary*. Edinburgh: The Handsel Press.
- Yarnold, E 1986. The Theology of Christian Spirituality. In: Jones, C & Wainwright, G (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK.